天地無用！真夏のイヴ

長谷川菜穂子

イラスト　長野伸明

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

A Midsummer's Eve

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Novel 12

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Prologue:
When Two Moons Light the Night Sky

When two moons light the night sky, and the silver river scatters tiny stars,
The earth below glows with countless little lights, dyeing the summer night silver.
La Startica!
A clear singing voice celebrates the summer night.
La Startica Edio!
Lovers gather in the shade of trees and whisper sweet words,
Just as tree and human were once joined,
So too may two souls be bound together.

The young prince leaned against the trunk of the Rhouju tree, still catching his breath.

Is she not here yet? Did I arrive too early?

His heart was still pounding from sprinting all the way up the hill. Maybe she got lost and couldn't find the place. He had been so sure she would be here the moment he arrived — with a child's impatient certainty — that when he found no one waiting at the base of the Rhouju tree, he had felt genuinely annoyed.

I told her to come before the Startica fireworks started...

The prince exhaled deeply and looked down at the city spread below him. The avenue trees and the town square were dotted with twinkling lights, and the small glowstones people carried in their hands swayed and glimmered with a faint, soft radiance.

At every doorway, as the old custom dictated, small Rhouju saplings and young trees just taller than a child were displayed, draped with star-shaped illuminations just like the great avenue trees.

At the Juraian royal palace, of course, it was the royal trees themselves that wore the stars.

That night, tiny lights swayed in every corner of the vast gardens, as if the stars of the sky had been lifted whole and set down upon the earth — countless points of light shimmering and glittering.

That was Startica... the Juraian summer star festival.

In the town square, people dressed in thin pastel garments had gathered, and crowds cheered for the young men and women stepping in time to the sounds of bells and flutes. Couples a little older sat with translucent blue drinks in hand around the fountain, while children darted and ran in front of them.

Everyone celebrated the sacred night, letting their thoughts drift back to the ancient legend of the first union of tree and human.

The night when three goddesses descended upon the Juraian planet and first spoke words with a tree.

They say that the first boy to become Emperor of Jurai came from a distant star.

And so tree and human became partners, and the foundation of the Juraian royal family was laid.

That is why lovers make their vows beneath a tree.

So that their love may be blessed, and they may be bound together forever...

"If I was going to be kept waiting anyway, I should have stayed and watched the square more slowly," the prince muttered, looking up at the Rhouju tree adorned with stars.

The Rhouju's branches spread horizontally like a canopy, its streamlined leaves swaying in the breeze. The illuminations shimmered and gleamed against the silver undersides of the leaves, just like the royal trees in the palace garden.

The prince was eight years old this year — exactly the right age to start sneaking away from dull ceremonies and going on adventures. In fact, he had been slipping out of the palace so often to play in the town square and on this lookout hill that the palace guards had taken to coming to find him with smiles on their faces.

But today was special!

The prince stepped away from beneath the Rhouju and craned his neck to look down at the path leading up the hill.

"Yuzuha..."

He felt a little self-conscious and glanced away.

Come to think of it, he didn't know where she lived, or what her parents' names were. He didn't know her age either. But he could tell she was older. He wasn't adult enough to guess a girl's age precisely, but even so, there were things you could sense from someone's manner and expression.

"...Is she not here yet?"

The prince noticed he was pacing back and forth restlessly and felt embarrassed at himself.

This is like a dog waiting for its master to come home!

I am the First Prince of the Juraian royal family.

I need to act a bit more princely or she'll laugh at me!

Just as the prince looked away from the path for a moment, a great booming sound filled the night sky, and a brilliant flower of light burst open.

Fireworks!

The prince forgot everything for an instant and tilted his face upward, transfixed by the enormous firework blooming above. Two, three rings of light overlapped and faded away like fleeting dreams.

The first volley of fireworks went off in a burst of cheerful brilliance and then ended just as abruptly as it had begun.

The prince sighed, feeling vaguely disappointed and lonesome, and slowly turned to make his way back beneath the Rhouju tree.

Just then, he heard light footsteps — like a small animal scurrying across the grass — and he spun around.

"Yuzuha!"

The girl waved her arm widely, her cheeks flushed pink as she ran toward him.

"Yuzuha! You came!"

The prince ran toward her without thinking.

"I came," she said.

The girl looked straight at him with her bright-colored eyes and gave a warm smile.

"Do you like me?"

"Huh?"

The prince was flustered and stared back at the girl standing before him.

A pale blue dress shimmered softly in the night breeze. A slender white hand reached down in a panic to hold the hem in place, and the girl looked down, shy and embarrassed.

The girl in her dress that seemed woven from a summer night's dream was more beautiful than anyone else walking through the streets of the city that night.

"You're beautiful," the prince whispered without thinking, and then went red when he realized what he'd said.

Oh no. My heart is pounding.

Until now I thought Mother was the most beautiful... but girls can be this beautiful and charming... I never knew!

"My, goodness..."

The girl also noticed and her cheeks turned pink.

She never answered his earlier question — but looking at the prince's spellbound expression, the answer wasn't needed.

"Are you really human? You're not a moon-witch from my dreams, are you? Somehow I..."

"Why? Why do you say that?"

The prince cut himself off sharply at the startled look on her face.

"Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I've met you several times and I don't know anything about you, so I want to know you better, that's all..."

"Is it wrong not to know?"

The girl averted her gaze and hugged the small box she was carrying more tightly.

"My name is Yuzuha. I live in the forest. There's a little house there, and I live alone. Inside the house there are stuffed animals everywhere... so I'm not lonely at all."

The girl's voice had grown distant.

The prince understood that he had said something wrong.

"Yuzuha..."

What should I say at a time like this?

Should I say it doesn't matter? Or should I ask about something else?

"Sorry. I didn't mean to..."

In the end he couldn't find the right words, and the prince faltered.

Just then, another great boom rang out and fireworks shot up into the sky.

"Oh, the second round!"

Once again the night sky bloomed with flowers of light, trailing down like meteors before fading away.

"Beautiful..."

The girl's murmur no longer sounded heavy.

"They were beautiful, weren't they. I've been watching for a long time, but those were the most beautiful of all."

"I saw the royal fireworks-maker building the firework shells. They're this big!" The prince spread his arms as wide as they would go.

"Hehe..."

The girl smiled and moved away from beneath the Rhouju, breaking into a light run.

"Where are you going?!"

The prince was surprised and ran after her. The girl's footsteps were so light they barely seemed to carry any weight at all.

"Look — the Startica parade!"

Where the girl was pointing, there was a river of stars.

Floats fashioned in the shapes of Juraian royal trees and ships sparkled with illuminations as they glided slowly through the square, with countless small swaying lights following before and behind them.

It looked as if a river of stars was flowing across the earth itself — and looking down from so high up was the first time he had ever seen the scene like this.

When the parade passed through, the Juraian royal palace would hold a long, long ceremony, and the young prince was supposed to sit quietly beside his mother.

"So this is what the parade looks like..."

The prince murmured, his heart pounding.

A thought flashed through his mind that there might be a great commotion back at the palace right now. He had slipped away while the adults were absorbed in the ceremony. He was certain to be scolded a great deal when he got back.

"For a long, long time, I watched alone," Yuzuha murmured.

"A long, long time — I was all by myself."

"...?"

For a moment the prince almost asked her to repeat herself, not quite understanding.

In the corner of his eye, the girl's profile had something different about it — something that made him hesitate.

It was as if the girl's form was only a vessel, and countless years had simply passed through her body.

Of course, at his age, the prince couldn't have understood the nature of what felt strange. It was simply that she was a child like him, and yet she carried no scent of childhood — and that was what unsettled him.

The parade was just below the hill, close enough to dash down and see up close, but the girl's eyes were as distant as if she were watching the silver river flowing through the night sky.

Why? Why do you have eyes like that? Who are you, really?

The promise had been made only yesterday!

The prince gazed at the girl's profile with a helpless yearning.

The eve of Startica... he and Yuzuha had met in the town square and played together until they lost track of time. They had been captivated by the old-fashioned performance of a traveling troupe of actors, been on edge over a simple coin-toss

game, and tried to peek backstage at the sideshow only to be driven away by a bodyguard who didn't know them — and they had spent the whole day together until it grew dark.

Seven-colored candy that dissolved in the summer air.

A drink transparent as the color of the sea.

Water droplets falling like jewels from the fountain, leaping up again into the sky.

All the bright, buoyant sights of the festival day — summer light sparkling on everything. Each moment shining.

Look, that kid fell over!

And that old lady's incredible hat — oh, it got caught on something!

Meaningless little exchanges. Laughing so hard you burst, running, panting and collapsing in the shade. Somewhere along the way he had lost his embroidered expensive jacket, and by the time he noticed, it wasn't in his hands anymore. In a thin shirt and brown trousers gathered at the ankle, looking just like any other boy from the town, Yuzuha laughed again at the sight of him.

What is it? You have such a dirty face! You wiped your face with your dirty hands, didn't you?

Huh? Really?

He made a blank expression and frantically rubbed his cheeks.

Now it's even dirtier. Go wash your face at the fountain!

On moments like that only she would use a commanding tone, as if invoking a girl's special privilege.

Why is the summer sun so dazzling?

Why does a day feel so endlessly long?

Why am I laughing this much?

When the sun began to tilt and the evening veil finally began to wrap around the square, the prince suddenly remembered his mother's face.

Oh no! I...

The eternal magic broke in an instant.

"I have to go home."

Yuzuha tilted her head.

"Mother will be angry at me. But we can meet again tomorrow, right?"

"Tomorrow..."

Yuzuha quietly echoed his words.

"I'll definitely sneak out in time for the fireworks! We can see each other again tomorrow, right?"

He kept repeating it like a child impatiently begging for a treat.

"I'll always be here... right here."

Her voice came from inside the gathering dusk.

"Not here! Someone will find us. The lookout hill."

"Where we first met?"

She understood.

"It's a promise!"

The prince squeezed Yuzuha's hand and ran off without looking back.

So he didn't notice when the girl's figure melted away into the twilight and disappeared.

I'll see her again tomorrow!

I will...!

I don't care if I get scolded.

The prince was scolded until he wanted to shrink into nothing — for skipping his sword practice and studies to run around playing, and for losing his jacket — but by the time he climbed into bed, he had completely forgotten it all.

"It's a promise, Yuzuha..."

Tomorrow, with the summer sun, the magic would come back to life.

And so...

"Do you like me?"

The prince was suddenly pulled back to reality.

"Will you come with me?"

"Huh?"

Yuzuha's face was right in front of him, glowing with a faint, bioluminescent light.

"Come... where?"

"My country. My world. My home."

Yuzuha's eyes took on a glistening, luminous quality.

"Into the eternal darkness."

At that moment, the roar of engines approached, and before he could blink, five airships surrounded them.

"Your Highness!!"

The palace guards came landing one after another.

"Stand back! It's dangerous!"

"This way, Your Highness!"

Before he could understand what was happening, the guards' hands grabbed the prince one after another, and shoved Yuzuha aside.

"Back! No one is to touch the prince!"

The gift box was knocked from Yuzuha's hands and rolled across the ground.

"Oh—!"

A guard struck sharply at his instinctively reaching hand.

"Restrain her!"

"Don't let her escape!"

The rod came down mercilessly on the slender shoulders of the girl.

"Help me... I didn't do anything..."

"Yuzuha!!"

The prince thrashed against the guard's grip.

"Stop it! Stop! Don't touch her!"

"You must not, Your Highness!"

A guard's boot crushed the small box.

There was a sharp pinging sound from inside, as if something had snapped, and small components scattered.

"My present..."

For a fleeting instant, a pale blue flame blazed in Yuzuha's eyes.

"Why?! I didn't do anything wrong!"

The next moment, the guard reeled back with his hand pressed to his cheek. The distinct marks of fingernails were carved in his flesh, blood dripping down.

"Let go. I'll kill you!"

Moving in a way no ordinary girl should, she slashed the guard's hand and leaped back, crouching like a wild animal. The prince clearly saw sharp, hooked claws on her slender, girlish hands — claws that had no business being there.

"Yuzuha...?!"

"You abominable creature!"

A harsh voice cut through the air. A figure passed slowly by the prince's side, holding a drawn sword that gleamed with light.

"Father!"

The Juraian Emperor gave the prince not even a glance, and turned to face Yuzuha.

"Creature of darkness, come to corrupt the royal bloodline and wither the flourishing roots. To bewitch an innocent young prince! You who dwell in shadows have no future. You are nothing but a pestilential vapor rising night after night from a lightless swamp."

"Uurgh..."

The girl crouched down, glaring up at the Emperor with luminous, glittering eyes.

"I know your methods. You disguise yourself, approach with honeyed words, and ensnare the soul — then let it slowly rot. Life dries up, time stops, and the vibrant soul withers and dies in the darkness. I am told your dwelling holds quite the collection of such things. But I will not allow you to have the prince!"

The sword of light flashed once — and almost simultaneously, the girl's figure exploded and scattered.

"Yuzuha—!"

The prince turned his face away in spite of himself.

Why? Why has it come to this?!

Was it my fault? For making promises on my own?

But the black mist that had seemed to disperse gathered again to a single point, and from within the swirling mass emerged a figure that bore no resemblance at all to the beautiful girl — small and beast-like.

"Idiot! Blockhead! You think you can solve everything by waving the sword of light! All Juraian royals are the same. You never think for a moment that there are living things outside the royal family. There are things that have lived since ancient times in the earth below and in the darkness of the forest! So why—"

The little monster's face twisted for just a moment.

"Uwaaaah—!!"

The thing that had been a girl let out a terrible crying wail and vanished like a black whirlwind.

The prince stood there with his eyes wide open, utterly speechless.

A monster... Yuzuha was not human.

She was trying to do something terrible... and yet, she said she liked me...

For an instant, a vision of a girl running through the summer sunlight flashed through his mind.
A magic that had vanished.
A promise that could never be taken back.

"I hate you, Father — I HATE YOU!!"

Crying, the prince wrenched his arm free from the guard's grasp.

All through the long, long summer, the prince kept himself shut away in a wing of the palace.

Do you like me...?

The lookout hill became sealed away in the prince's heart, and it became a rule that he would spend every summer night star festival within the palace walls.

Some years later, on a certain spring day when he visited the lookout hill, the broken gift box had completely vanished, and in its place the ground was covered in a carpet of violet flowers — called the Royal Family's Tears in the Juraian tongue.

"...What a strange dream I had."

Katsuhito crawled out of his futon and made his way to the kitchen for water.

Today was Christmas Eve — though the date had long since turned, and Ryoko and the others who had been merrily carousing until late were by now each lost in their own dreams.

"Startica..."

In the corner of the darkened living room, the Christmas tree's lights glowed quietly.

Those were the old days...

Katsuhito murmured.

Far in the past, faintly glowing in the corner of his memory from when he was very young — a painful, tender recollection.

What had that girl's face looked like? He had even forgotten her name by now.

Come to think of it, it had been a long time since he had seen Startica. I would like to show it to Tenchi someday.

The Juraian summer star festival illuminations were far more humble than this planet's Christmas lights — but to my eyes as a child, they looked more beautiful than anything in the world...

He drank the cold water, and the unsettled feeling in his chest finally calmed.

Katsuhito quietly returned to his futon, let out a single sigh, and closed his eyes.

For just a moment, the blazing sunlight pouring down from a midsummer sky flickered through his mind — but whether it was a memory from his boyhood or the heat shimmering over the grounds of Masaki Shrine, he could no longer tell.

Around the same time —

Far across the sea of stars, beyond the dimensional barrier, in the depths of Jurai's darkness, a demon woke.

That thing — frozen in a long, long, timeless sleep — opened its deep crimson eyes, stretched with a long, slow mmmm, and sat up.

"I had such a boring dream..."

Sharp claws gently combed through the silky fur on its ear.

Large ears covered in silver fur, and rich silver hair cascading in waves down its back, gave the creature an overall impression that was somewhat beast-like.

In terms of Earth animals, it was something like a young fox — that sort of image.

But the kind of innocent, pure charm associated with small animals was nowhere in the expression.

This was a face that could bare white fangs and deliver the killing strike to a prey's throat — a face that held that coldness alongside all its other qualities.

"Why would I dream about the prince..." The creature spoke sharply to the wall. "Hey!"

Yuzuha called out to the monitors embedded like a honeycomb into every surface of the wall.

"Is someone on Jurai talking about me? Find out!"

Instantly, scan lines ran across hundreds of monitors.

She was awake again.

Before long, images began to appear — various places and people of Jurai. The long-lived members of the Juraian royal family — Funaho and Misaki appeared unchanged — but the look of the city had changed considerably, or so it seemed.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Hm? Just a little over seven hundred years."

A stuffed animal lying nearby answered. Their master had woken, so its consciousness had returned to its active state.

"That long?"

One of the monitors showed the Juraian Emperor Azusa, and Yuzuha furrowed her brow.

"You took quite a beating, after all," said the stuffed animal, laughing its chuckling little laugh as if this was entirely hilarious.

"Shut up!"

Yuzuha picked up one of the thin specimen knives scattered on the floor and threw it at the stuffed animal.

With a soft puff, the knife skewered the stuffed animal through the belly.

"She's angry! She's angry! Yuzuha got angry!"

All the scattered stuffed animals began jeering at once.

"Quiet, I said!"

Yuzuha hopped up, ignored the stuffed animals, and swept her gaze across all the monitors.

"Hmm?"

There was one monitor showing a disrupted image.

"What are you doing over there?"

She gave it a light flick.

The monitor showed an unfamiliar blue planet, and at tremendous speed dove deep into its heart. A nighttime landscape with something white falling — then a water surface rippling gently came into view.

A moon reflected and wavering on the surface of the water.

"A guardian..."

A guardian of the Jurai Imperial Family stood on pure white ground, wearing a red hat with green rings.

Then, with a swishing sound, the image changed to show the interior of a room somewhere.

Cheerful music played; a green tree sparkled with colorful stars; the table was spread with what looked like delicious food.

"Startica!?"

Yuzuha's eyes fixed on the glittering Christmas tree.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!"

Unfamiliar faces exchanged greetings.

"Thank you."

A round-faced boy answered shyly.

"The prince!?"

Yuzuha's eyes went wide.

"Why would he be in a place like—"

No, wait. This wasn't Yosho. He was a bit older. And the color of his eyes was different.

"Well, Tenchi. It's a lively Christmas this year, isn't it."

An older man, glass in hand, called out.

"Hey, Grandpa, is it okay to celebrate Christmas when we live at a shrine?"

"Of course it is! All humanity is one family, and all religion is one."

"Tenchi?"

Yuzuha narrowed her eyes.

Who is this boy? And who is this man he's calling 'Grandpa'?

As if on cue, the older man looked up.

For an instant, his eyes gleamed a clear violet.

"Yosho!?"

Is it Yosho!?

In an instant everything connected.

She didn't understand why, but Yosho had aged — and here he was now.

And this boy was one who carried Yosho's bloodline — which meant he was of the prince's lineage.

That was why the search system had caught him.

"Where is this planet?"

"Third planet of the solar system. Earth."

The monitor answered.

"The Jurain royal bloodline has gathered here."

"Open a passage!"

Yuzuha commanded sharply.

"No, wait... I'll observe for now."

On the screen, the youngest-looking girl had just handed a small box to the boy called Tenchi.

"Tenchi brother, it's your Christmas present!"

A present—?

All at once, Startica's illuminations gleamed in her mind. As if it were yesterday, something ached and squeezed deep in her chest.

"I never got to give it. The present..."

Yuzuha's eyes went dark with sorrow.

"It got broken."

If she had given it that day, if the prince had opened it — they would never have met again like this.

It had been a doorway to lead the prince away into this world of darkness. A key to stop time and stay as a child forever.

"I loved him so much. I only wanted to play with him forever. That was all..."

Yuzuha's hand drifted and moved to shut off the monitor.

But her hand stopped.

"I'll send a present! A present from Yuzuha to the prince. This time, I'll be careful and not fail!"

Yuzuha suddenly plunged her hand through the screen.

It was her first time ever reaching into an unstable subspace passage.

Yuzuha bit her lip and pulled her hand back out.

"The prince's hair..."

In her hand were a few thin, straight black hairs.

"Fix coordinates! Secure monitoring level 1 and stand by!"

She screamed at the monitor, her deep eyes blazing, then kicked the stuffed animals aside and ran.

Her heart was pounding.

Excitement rushed through her entire body.

"Startica is starting!"

She leaped into a hollow that gaped open in a tree trunk, and instantly slid out into another room.

Shelves lined every wall, holding all manner of data and specimens — a research laboratory.

"My love, bind my heart with a chain of silver—"

The old love song sung by wandering performers came suddenly to her lips.

"With a silver chain on which words of love are carved—"

She pulled out strands of her own hair as she sang.

"Sharing the same dream, walking forward together—"

She winced slightly at the small pain.

"Crossing the silver river, into our magical world together—"

Inside the cultivation tank, a semi-transparent liquid churned.

Yuzuha furrowed her brow, brought the two strands of hair together, and gently dropped them into the cultivation tank.

"All things return to where they belong."

Silver and black — the two hairs rotated slowly and eventually formed a small intertwined ring.

"Two souls shall one day become one — and be bound together."

The ring began to glow.

Yuzuha held her breath and watched the light.

It grew stronger and stronger, then flashed with a brilliance like an explosion.

And then, in the cultivation liquid, a pale blue crystal appeared.

A slow smile spread across Yuzuha's cheeks.

"Hello, nameless little life."

Yuzuha looked up toward the ceiling. She could feel invisible energy pouring down from the dark tree's eye amid the countless roots spreading across the ceiling.

Chapter One:
Tenchi in a Shower of Cicadas

Tenchi made his way slowly up the stone steps in the shower of cicada song.

Even though it was still morning, one step out of the shade meant the full force of the midsummer sun beating down.

"Looks like it'll be another hot one today," Tenchi murmured, squinting against the brightness, and resumed climbing the steps in silence.

When he reached the graveyard overlooking the Masaki house, Tenchi carefully began to clean the area around his mother Achika's grave.

Since he had left school, the grave-tending duties that had been his father Nobuyuki's responsibility had become Tenchi's.

"Mom..." He placed the freshly cut canna flowers he had brought that morning and put his hands together.

"Father and Grandpa are doing fine. Every day is noisy, but everyone's in good health. Honestly, what a handful," he added with a reflexive grumble, then smiled at himself.

Mihoshi and Kiyone had come to stay at the Masaki house for the Obon holiday. This morning they had all been cheerfully helping clean up.

I wish I could show Mom the Masaki house full of girls from wall to wall, Tenchi thought.

What would she say?

Actually, she probably already knows. Mom has been watching over me and Father all along.

"Father will come by later," Tenchi said as he stood up, and headed down the steps with his bucket.

He was about halfway down the steps when the cicadas suddenly went quiet, and a gust of wind swept around him and passed on.

"Huh...?"

Tenchi stopped and looked up into the branches. He had felt as if something had passed by.

"Mom?"

He felt as if he had been called, and turned around. There on the stone steps sat a girl he had never seen before. She wore a fluffy summer dress and held a small box in her arms. Her face was partly hidden by a hat.

"Who are you?"

The girl stood up and walked toward Tenchi.

"Papa...!"

When she took her hat off, a smile appeared — radiant as the dazzling summer sun.

"Sorry I'm late."

It was an instant. Before Tenchi could open his mouth, the girl's arms wrapped around him in an embrace.

Papa...?!

Tenchi registered the feel of the girl's slender frame against him, and distantly felt his mind going completely blank.

He came back to himself about a full minute later.

"H-hey, you!"

He forcibly pulled the girl off him.

"What's the matter? Did you mistake me for someone else?"

Even as he said it, he knew it was an absurd question — but he couldn't help asking.

"I'm Mayuka."

She looked about the same age as him. That was the only way he could describe it.

"I came to see my papa!"

The girl gave him a bright smile and clung to his arm.

"W-wait a minute!"

If someone saw this it would be terrible.

That didn't quite seem to be the real problem, but his mind was so panicked that he was beyond judging good and bad.

"Please..."

When he tried to detach her, the girl seemed to think he was just being bashful and clung even harder.

"Okay, okay. I get it. Just let go for a minute. I need to get home."

"Mayuka's going home too! Let's go!"

The girl smiled happily and started leading Tenchi down the steps by the hand.

Even when they reached the front door, Tenchi still hadn't figured out what to do.

The girl was still cheerfully clinging to him, and Tenchi's blood pressure was rising too high for him to think of anything.

"I-I'm home..."

"Welcome back."

There was an immediate response, and Ayeka appeared.

"Tenchi?!"

There was an eerie pause.

"Oh... um, well, this is..."

Hearing the voice, Ryoko poked her face out.

"What's this about?"

"What happened, Tenchi brother?"

Sasami appeared too.

"A guest?"

Mihoshi came, drawn by curiosity.

"Miya?"

Even Ryo-Ohki was tilting her head.

"What did I ask you?!"

Impatient Ryoko was already closing in on the girl.

"So, um, well, you see..."

Finally Nobuyuki appeared.

"What's wrong, Ryoko?"

He stared at the girl wide-eyed.

"I found her!" Tenchi finally gave up and shouted. "On the stone steps..."

"Tenchi dear, if there's a reason, please explain properly," Ayeka said, cutting in impatiently.

"I don't understand. This girl just... came along with me."

Just then, Mayuka, who had been looking round at everyone with wide eyes, smiled brightly up at Tenchi.

"Papa!"

"EHHHHHHHHH!?"

A tremendous uproar broke out.

"Papa-aa!"

Mayuka clung tightly to Tenchi's arm.

"Mayuka's Papa!"

"WHAT, WHAT, WHAT — EHHHHHHHHHH!?"

An even bigger uproar followed.

"W-what do you mean, Papa?!" Ayeka staggered.

Ryoko seemed to have completely frozen, not saying a word.

"T-Tenchi, you..." Poor Nobuyuki was speechless.

"It's a j-joke... it is, right?!"

"I love you, Papa!"

Mayuka hugged Tenchi tight and snuggled her cheek against him with a blissful expression.

"GYAAAAA—!!"

Ryoko finally snapped.

"Hey, what's the idea?! Depending on the circumstances, you won't get off easy!"

"W-wait! Ryoko, wait! I'll go get Grandpa!"

Nobuyuki, having gone pale, shoved Ryoko at Ayeka and ran off without looking back.

"My, my..."

Mihoshi, the only one who hadn't joined the panic — watching Mayuka with puzzled curiosity — stepped forward.

"I'm sure there's some explanation. Come on, why don't we all go inside?"

"Okay!"

Mayuka beamed and quickly took off her shoes and stepped up into the house.

"Soda... will that be okay?"

The ice clinked with a cool, refreshing sound.

That Sasami was the undisputed lady of the house could be seen in the effortless way she handled things.

"Your name is Mayuka?"

"Uh-huh."

Mayuka picked up the glass casually and sniffed at it.

"It tickles! It goes all fizzy in my nose!"

"I know. Sasami was surprised too, at first."

"Papa, you try too! It's funny!"

Mayuka grinned and pushed the glass toward Tenchi.

"Oh, that's not the point..."

"Drink together? Then Mayuka will give you some."

She held the straw out toward him.

To any outside observer, it would have looked like a pair of very close sweethearts.

"Cut it out!!" Ryoko finally yelled. "You've been getting way too comfortable! Who are you? What's your reason for getting close to Tenchi?!"

"Huh?"

Mayuka turned and looked completely bewildered.

"All this cozying up — what do you think you're doing?"

"What about it!"

Ryoko was momentarily taken aback by the unexpected comeback.

"What's wrong with clinging to my Papa? Who are you anyway?"

She glared with eyes like an angry cat.

"What did you say?!"

Ryoko got hot under the collar.

This was the third time. Her patience was at its limit.

"Fine then. Let's see what you've got."

An aura blade appeared in Ryoko's hand, and she brought it down at once.

"Kyah!"

The blade passed just past Mayuka's shoulder.

"What are you doing?!"

"You idiot, stop it, Ryoko!"

Tenchi shot to his feet in alarm.

"C'mon, hurry and run or I'll tickle you with this thing!"

Ryoko, in high spirits, swung the aura blade around.

"Come on, come on, come on—"

She chased Mayuka all around the room.

"Papa! Help me!!"

"Ryoko!"

Tenchi knew things were getting out of hand.

Of course Ryoko wasn't serious. She was only teasing.

But Mayuka was frightened, nearly in tears.

"What's all the noise about?" Washu, who had been shut away in her lab until now, appeared.

"I don't wanna!!"

A light began gathering in Mayuka's hands.

"What?!"

Ryoko froze.

The light rapidly condensed and formed the shape of a sword.

"That is—"

"The Light Hawk Wings Sword!?"

Ayeka and Tenchi stared at each other.

The gleaming sword in Mayuka's hand looked exactly like the Light Hawk Sword. But without the Juraian bloodline, the Light Hawk Sword should be impossible to wield...

"Impossible!"

Almost by reflex Ryoko cried out.

If this was the Light Hawk Sword, then this girl really was Tenchi's... no way that can be right!

She's no ordinary person. She's not just some deranged kid. There's definitely something suspicious about her.

But if it's come to this, it's actually convenient. I'll expose her true identity right here in front of Tenchi!

"You wanna fight?!"

Ryoko readied her aura blade.

"Idiot!!"

With that, Mayuka charged like a gust of wind.

Unexpectedly quick. Her movements were unlike an ordinary girl's.

"Whoa."

Ryoko sidestepped barely in time.

"Not bad. Where'd you learn that?"

"I don't know! I didn't know I could do that!"

Crying, Mayuka threw herself at Ryoko again.

"Stop it, Ryoko! Both of you, stop!"

Just as Tenchi tried to jump between them—

"Stop!"

Katsuhito burst into the room.

A split second later, he caught Mayuka firmly in his arms.

And with that, the light sword vanished from Mayuka's hands.

"Grandpa!?"

"Just arrived," Katsuhito said calmly, setting Mayuka down.

"Young lady. Whatever your circumstances, there will be no bloodshed in this house. Ryoko, you put your blade away too."

"Who is he!?"

Katsuhito peered closely into Mayuka's wide eyes.

"I'm the priest at Masaki Shrine. Ryoko is like a granddaughter to me."

Katsuhito's eyes were gentle.

"Grandpa, just now..."

"This is my grandson Tenchi."

Before he could finish, Katsuhito took Mayuka by the shoulder and turned her to face Tenchi.

"Now calm down, Tenchi. It's almost noon — why don't we eat something?"

"Eat...?" Tenchi echoed involuntarily.

"Young lady, you eat, don't you? Go wash your hands."

Katsuhito put his hand on Mayuka's shoulder and promptly left the room.

Behind him, the dumbfounded group was left standing.

"Sorry about that, Tenchi. I panicked too."

Nobuyuki, who had been holding his breath at the entrance, gave a relieved smile.

"Well, whatever this is, it looks like Grandpa's right — better to eat something and talk it over calmly. Right, Ryoko?"

"Hmph."

Ryoko turned away with a sour expression but didn't argue back.

"Sasami, sorry, but could you..."

"Um... will somen noodles do?"

Sasami returned the smile, also looking relieved.

"Oh, just a moment."

Washu hurried after them in her nurse outfit, holding a large syringe.

"I just need a tiny bit of your blood... No? Then your hair will be fine."

Washu held Mayuka's hair in her hand and returned triumphantly to the lab.

"Tch... meddlesome." Yuzuha frowned and pushed the monitor away. "Well, that's fine. The first move is made. The fun starts now."

She flopped down sulkily on her elbow.

As she did, the monitor obediently descended to the floor.

"It's summer over there..." Yuzuha looked around her room.

The room with only one light source was dark enough without the monitor's glow that you could barely see your own feet.

"The thing is, Yuzuha is just too hasty."

"Startica has only just started."

"If you want to call this prank Startica."

"I do! You can't help it! Special presents are given at Startica."

"Decorating the dark tree with stars — you were so serious about it."

"SHUT UP!!"

Yuzuha grabbed the most talkative stuffed animal and threw it into the middle of the others.

Left to themselves, they would talk forever. That was because they responded to Yuzuha's own feelings and actions — she had made them that way.

In truth, she had intended to seal an individual chosen soul inside each one.

But somehow the souls had escaped, and all that remained were the empty shells — the systems Yuzuha had created — doing nothing but endless chatter.

Still, it was better than having nothing. Better than sitting in total silence with nothing at all.

"You're all stupid. I hate all of you!"

The stuffed animals went quiet.

Human shapes and animal shapes; fish and birds — every creature of the light world was represented among them, with slightly sinister faces, as befitting the dark world's creations.

"You can't hold a candle to real ones anyway!"

"That's mean..."

A small sobbing sound was heard.

"It's not our fault. We're only stuffed animals."

The quiet murmurings and chatter began again.

"Hmph."

Yuzuha snorted with contempt and ignored the chatter, turning her eyes back to the monitor.

Bullying the stuffed animals always cheered her up a little.

It always had.

But today she felt irritated despite herself.

Yuzuha felt like she wanted to cry, but she didn't know how.

"He looks like he's having fun, that one..."

On the monitor, everyone had gathered around the table, with Mayuka at the center.

Chapter Two:
Two Bowls of Somen Noodles on the Low Table

Two large bowls of somen noodles sat on the low table.

Around that table was gathered the full Masaki house contingent.

Tenchi and Mayuka were by the window.

Ayeka and Ryoko sat across from them.

The rest were seated around those two pairs.

It was the most tense lunch the Masaki house had ever seen since its founding.

"Delicious!"

The notorious guest was innocently slurping noodles and beaming at Tenchi beside her.

"G-good," Tenchi said, smiling back slightly warily.

"Do you know everyone's names now?"

"Uh-huh. Ayeka, Mihoshi, Kiyone... Father, Grandpa, Ryo-Ohki, and Sasami."

"My goodness!" Ayeka frowned, hearing herself called by name without an honorific.

"I'll have you know I am—"

"Why isn't my name on the list!?"

Ryoko cut in with angry eyes.

"I don't know. I forgot."

Mayuka serenely reached for more noodles.

Clearly she was still sulking about earlier. Entirely understandable under the circumstances.

"Ughhh..."

Ryoko shot a glance at Tenchi.

(Easy, easy.)

That was written all over Tenchi's face.

"I'm Ryoko! Next time you say you've forgotten, I'll send you flying! Remember that!"

Telling herself she had held back admirably, Ryoko shoveled somen into her mouth with fierce abandon.

"Papa, do you like somen?"

Mayuka completely ignored Ryoko and peered up into Tenchi's face.

"Uh, yeah—"

"Which do you like better — somen or Mayuka?"

"Huh?! Hmm..."

He wanted to say 'somen!' but this was no situation for jokes.

"Mayuka likes both Papa and somen best of all!"

Tenchi very nearly threw in the towel on life.

Not because he'd been compared to somen noodles. That he didn't mind.

It was because he had finally fully grasped just how thoroughly he was being wrapped around this girl's little finger.

"Mayuka, stop chatting and eat up," Tenchi said.

It was the most un-Tenchi thing he had ever said in his life. The kind of thing his parents had said to him, that he'd never imagined saying himself.

What in the world... am I digging myself deeper into a hole?

"Oh, I'll get some for you!"

Mayuka's chopsticks darted out.

"How much? This much? More?"

"No, it's okay. I'll get my own."

Tenchi glanced across the table.

He caught sight of Ayeka and Ryoko slurping their noodles with expressions like demons.

"Too bad! I got it specially — here you go."

She managed to put noodles in his bowl anyway.

"How is it? Good?"

"Look—"

Ryoko slammed her hand on the table and half-rose to her feet.

"Always, always messing with Tenchi — can't you eat a meal in peace?!"

Mayuka glanced at Ryoko and then immediately appealed to Tenchi.

"Papaa, this person is bullying Mayuka~"

"Why you—!"

And then Katsuhito, who had been quietly eating his noodles, let out a pointed cough.

"Tch."

Grudgingly Ryoko sat back down, though her insides were seething.

In the meantime Tenchi stood up.

"Thanks for the meal, Sasami."

"Where are you going?"

Mayuka reacted instantly.

"Just going to take a bath. I went to the grave this morning and got all sweaty."

He said it with a slightly apologetic air, and Tenchi quickly left the room.

"Oh, Mayuka too."

"What!?"

Ryoko and Ayeka could not believe their ears.

"Papa, wait~"

From the dining room to the doorway of the living room was no more than three meters.

Mayuka sprang up and in one fluid motion had undone her back zipper, pulled her left sleeve off, pulled her right sleeve off, wriggled her dress down to her waist and let it fall to the floor — faster than you could blink, she was down to just a slip.

The hem of the slip fluttered, and a flash of pure white underwear was visible.

"Kyah!"

Ayeka instinctively covered her eyes.

"Papa~!"

"W-wait!!"

The first to unfreeze was Ryoko.

"I SAID WAIT!"

"Mayuka!"

Ayeka was late but dashed forward.

Mayuka was tackled from both sides just past the doorway and stumbled.

"Aaah! Why?!"

"We're the ones who want to know why!" Ryoko and Ayeka said in unison, for once perfectly in sync.

Meanwhile, oblivious to all this, Washu was shut in her lab staring intently at a monitor.

The analysis device had the strand of hair taken from Mayuka earlier set up inside it.

"Analyze this and I'll know the girl's true identity," Washu said, chopsticks in hand as she typed on the keyboard.

Her somen lunch set sat beside the keyboard.

Eating while working was not exactly good manners, but it was perhaps the mark of a genius scientist.

At least it had no effect whatsoever on the speed of her mind.

The monitor displayed the analysis results.

"Hmm-hmm... hm, interesting..."

Washu set her chopsticks down and crossed her arms.

The analysis wasn't complete, but at least one thing had become clear.

"The analyzable genes are a perfect match for Tenchi's — which means the only way to describe her is as his daughter. The mystery is the part I can't analyze."

Washu glanced at another device. It was the spacetime continuum monitor that had sounded an alert while Tenchi was out this morning — a type of radar that detected changes within a ten-kilometer radius centered on the Masaki house.

"The fact that this went off means a fluctuation occurred in the spacetime continuum."

It wasn't impossible that the girl had arrived from some point in the future.

Of course the possibility of another dimension couldn't be ruled out either.

"Perhaps I should put a sensor on her and monitor her movements."

Washu murmured, then went back to her somen.

The thought of 'I should' competed with the thought of 'I should just watch.'

"Oh well."

For now, every single person in the Masaki house was focused on the girl.

Perhaps the correct play here was to refrain from interference and stay watchful.

Having decided that, Washu quickly stood, stacked her dishes, and left the lab.

"Just what do you mean by all this? How old are you exactly? Come on, you have to put your clothes back on."

Ayeka reluctantly helped Mayuka back into her dress and did up the zipper.

"Now explain yourself so we can all understand."

Mayuka looked at Ayeka, then at Ryoko, and tilted her head.

She had been caught outside the front door again while still in her slip trying to get out.

"Are you... angry?"

"Of course I am!"

Ayeka said back, actually baffled inside.

Being around this girl threw her off somehow. Because Mayuka was so open and direct, Ayeka was more baffled than angry.

"Where do you come from? How did you get here?" Ryoko pressed, with a hard expression.

"Hey — what are you, exactly?!"

"I... don't know."

Mayuka took a step back, looking frightened.

"Don't shout at her," Kiyone said, stepping in with a gentler approach. "Mayuka, where is your mama?"

"Mama? I don't know."

Mayuka tilted her head with an innocently puzzled look.

"You don't know... then where is your home?"

Mayuka shook her head.

"I only remember Papa's face. I found myself here when I came to my senses."

"Could she have amnesia?"

Kiyone and Mihoshi exchanged a glance.

"If so, that's terrible. We shouldn't push her," Mihoshi said sympathetically. "She doesn't look like she's trying to deceive anyone."

"Yeah, you're right..." Tenchi murmured, still unable to come out from inside the front door.

"...which is exactly what's troubling me."

"Oh, Tenchi? Didn't you go to the floating hot spring?"

Washu coming out of the lab called over to him.

Tenchi jumped and turned around, putting his finger to his lips and pointing outside.

"Ah, I see. Then briefly—"

Washu beckoned him over and leaned close to his ear.

"Something interesting turned up about that girl. Tenchi, when she calls you Papa — she means it."

"WHAT!?"

Tenchi was so shocked he let out a cry without meaning to.

"Did you say Tenchi is still here, Sasami?" Sasami popped her head out from the kitchen. "Want some watermelon?"

Tenchi looked back blankly and shook his head.

"N-no way..."

"Ohhh, the watermelon is cut! Everyone, come around to the veranda!"

Sasami called out toward the garden and went cheerfully back to the kitchen.

This is a lie. This has to be a mistake.

Tenchi couldn't stand being there and bolted out the front door.

"No way!" In the end the watermelon was passed around and Ryoko and the others were lined up on the veranda with Mayuka in the middle, digging in.

The afternoon sun poured down along with the cicadas' cries, giving the scene the look of a perfectly ordinary summer moment.

"I'm saying it's suspicious even if she's his daughter! She shows up out of nowhere and claims to know nothing else!"

Ryoko was spraying spittle at Mayuka's head from behind as she rattled on.

"If she has amnesia she can't help it," Mihoshi argued back, unusually pushy.

"Also — if this girl is Tenchi's daughter, that means her mother is Tenchi's wife, doesn't it?"

"W-well yes..."

Ayeka's hand stopped with a jolt.

"Just when exactly did Tenchi get married?"

Ryoko was as insistent as ever.

"Well, sometime in the future, right? Because that makes sense."

Mihoshi was getting a bit worked up too.

"Wait a moment. So she came from the future?"

"I'd say that's pretty much the feeling!"

Washu appeared right on cue.

"Ryoko, I understand how you feel, but. I was just analyzing this girl's hair, and the results were unexpected. Her genes are identical to Tenchi's."

"Are you serious!?"

Ryoko was speechless.

"I should also mention that a fluctuation in the spacetime continuum was observed during the time period when Tenchi was at the grave."

"So that's it then..."

Mihoshi looked at the blankly puzzled Mayuka and smiled.

"She came for a proper reason. Drawn by fate."

"Really?! So she really is a daughter from the future?"

Kiyone's eyes went wide.

"Well... I'm not sure. The mother's genes are unidentifiable. And I didn't see the moment she appeared."

Washu remained coolly analytical as always.

"Tenchi's wife..."

Ayeka murmured with a dreamy look.

"If that's really true... then one of us would be... which one of us...?"

"Oh, big sister is already getting into it!"

Sasami observed sharply and teased.

"Sasami!"

Ayeka retorted, but she didn't look entirely displeased.

"Looking at it that way, this girl does look a little like Tenchi somehow... her mother must be beautiful."

Naturally she couldn't come right out and say that the mother was herself.

"Could it possibly be Ayeka?" Mihoshi chimed in with perfect timing.

She must have an ability to sense people's unconscious desires.

"My, goodness..."

Ayeka blushed and looked sideways at Ryoko.

"It could be Mihoshi," she said, conspicuously not suggesting Ryoko.

"Or maybe Ryoko!" Sasami was very skilled at teasing adults.

"Wh-what?! Don't be ridiculous!" Ryoko predictably flustered.

"Isn't everyone getting ahead of themselves?" the pragmatic Kiyone said, unable to follow.

"All possibilities are open — even Sasami," Washu grinned, inserting herself mischievously.

"Huh?! Sasami?!" Sasami's eyes went wide, and she started counting on her fingers.

"Tenchi is sixteen now, and Sasami is nine, so um... Mayuka, how old are you?"

Sasami looked around in bewilderment.

"Mayuka?"

There wasn't a trace of her.

"She was just sitting here..."

"OH! That little—"

Ryoko jumped to her feet, her expression alarmed.

Chapter Three:
Inside the Floating Hot Spring

The floating hot spring was full of peace.

For Tenchi, whose nerves had been frayed by all the commotion, it was like a world apart — a sanctuary of silence.

"Haah... I have absolutely no idea what's going on..."

As if splashing his face would wake him up, Tenchi caught some cold spring water in his palms and scrubbed his face two, three times.

The cold water felt pleasant on his flushed face as it ran down, but no matter how refreshed he felt, reality remained the same.

"This is nothing short of a bad dream. Why do I have to be called 'Papa' when I haven't done anything?!"

Well, she is a cute girl...

Honest, innocent, free-spirited.

If it weren't for this Papa business, she'd be charming enough to make his heart skip a beat.

And then there was that sword of light.

If it really was the Light Hawk Sword, if what Washu said was true, then I'm looking at the future.

Meeting a daughter who's the same age as me... say I got married at twenty and a child was born right away — when that child reached her current age, I'd be thirty-six?

Just who did I marry?

Who gave that child her name?

No, no, nothing is confirmed yet, what am I saying.

Am I an idiot?!

Tenchi's worries were deep enough that he didn't notice the door to the men's bath slowly open and slowly close.

"Guess who~"

Suddenly blindfolded from behind, Tenchi nearly had a heart attack.

"M-Mayuka?!"

When he spun around, a naked Mayuka was right in front of him.

Blindingly, absolutely naked.

She wasn't even trying to cover herself, same as a small child.

"That's so mean! Leaving Mayuka behind like that!"

Mayuka pouted and splashed toward Tenchi.

"Whoa! Don't — I mean, please don't come over here!"

Tenchi narrowly avoided crouching in the water.

A memory of a very similar situation long ago flashed through his mind.

That time... Ryoko dragged me into the women's bath.

Come to think of it, he had never had a pleasant experience in an onsen. The hot spring might as well be his personal nemesis.

"What? Am I that strange to look at?"

"I-I'm sorry."

Realizing he had been staring, he reflexively turned his back.

That seemed to signal something.

"I love you, Papa!"

Mayuka also sank down with a splash and pressed her cheek against Tenchi's back.

"I really love you! I'm happy just being close to you like this! I just want to squeeze you!"

Shouldn't have turned my back.

Now I'm even more helplessly stuck.

With her hugging me this hard, my reason...

"Papa is so mysterious. Mayuka can only think about you. When I'm pressed against you like this, my heart races and there's a funny feeling deep inside me, and I feel like I want to cry. Why? Does everyone feel that way? Or is it just Mayuka?"

"M-Mayuka..."

No, that's wrong, Mayuka.

You can't say that.

If you feel like that, you can't call me Papa anymore...

"I still don't know so many things, it seems. Teach me, Papa. What am I? What is this feeling that makes me feel strange?"

It was as though she had leaped from childhood straight to sixteen in a single jump.

Certainly for a sixteen-year-old, the things she said and did were strangely childlike.

Maybe it was the amnesia.

But then, when her memories returned and she understood who she was — how much of a shock would it be?

When she understood what she had been doing...

"Mayuka, take your hands off me!"

Tenchi said it firmly and grabbed Mayuka's hands.

"No! Don't go anywhere! Stay with Mayuka!"

He could sense Mayuka shaking her head against his back.

Just then, the sliding door rattled open.

"T...e...n...c...h...i..."

Ayeka and Ryoko burst in and froze.

Tenchi stood dumbstruck in the middle of the bath, listening to the final bell tolling faintly in the depths of his ears.

"TENCHIII—!!"

"KYAHHH!!"

Ryoko charged in with a face like she was about to cry, while Mayuka screamed — nearly simultaneously.

"You — after everything — you do something even I wouldn't do!!"

"Kyaah, Papa, help me!"

"R-Ryoko! Calm down! Listen to me!"

"Tenchi, this is too much! Even if she is your daughter, that kind of—"

"Ayeka, please hear me out! I didn't do anything—"

If this scene had gone on another five minutes, he definitely would have lost his mind.

Rescue came from an unexpected direction.

Katsuhito appeared with a large bath towel and nabbed the root cause with a firm grip.

"Kyah...!"

Katsuhito quickly wrapped the towel around Mayuka and lifted her up with an easy 'heave-ho.'

"There, there. Next time you'll bathe with Grandpa."

Mayuka looked up at Katsuhito's face with wide, puzzled eyes.

"Is Grandpa Tenchi's father?"

"More or less."

"Then that's fine."

Mayuka curled up contentedly in Katsuhito's arms.

She seemed to have snapped from sixteen back to a small child in an instant.

"Bye-bye. See you later!"

Mayuka waved cheerfully.

Katsuhito gave Tenchi a wink, then calmly walked out of the men's bath.

"What in the world was that all about?!" Ryoko and Ayeka stared at each other, baffled.

"I really don't know..." Tenchi said. He felt as though he had already used up a full day's worth of energy.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! That's it, keep it going, stir it up more!"

Yuzuha was in her room watching the events in the floating hot spring and roaring with laughter — until Katsuhito appeared and caught Mayuka, at which point she stopped dead.

"Damn you, old Yosho. That was just getting good! Why do you have to meddle in everything?!"

You've gotten old on me... I don't care about the grown-up you anymore!

Yuzuha muttered.

Always interrupting right at the good part.

You're still protecting the prince!

Just like the Emperor of Jurai protected his son all those years ago.

"Things aren't going well," said one stuffed animal.

"The plan has some flaws in it," another added.

"Trying to make the prince yours — from their perspective that's a real nuisance, y'know."

"If you just went yourself and grabbed him, it'd be over already."

"She got beaten up so badly that one time, she's scared."

"That's not it!!"

Yuzuha kicked one of the stuffed animals in frustration.

"If I go myself, Yosho will figure it out! A dummy body won't be detected!"

"So she is scared. Scared of being found out."

"Stupid, stupid, stupidly stupid!"

Screaming, she kicked the stuffed animals flying.

"This is my masterpiece! You lot can't do anything. You can't even mend a single torn seam yourselves!"

"We're sorry, we're sorry..."

"The genius over here is up against the genius over there!"

"Of course I'll win!"

Yuzuha glared at the fish stuffed animal and pummeled it.

"Darkness is older than light. Darkness is stronger than light. So I'm the stronger one."

Yuzuha tossed the fish stuffed animal aside, flopped onto her back and started watching the monitor again.

Outside, Kiyone and Mihoshi were fussing over Mayuka.

"Hold still."

"Just because it's summer doesn't mean you should stay wet."

"But it's so hot."

"You can't walk around in your underwear — Tenchi will be embarrassed."

"But I don't have any other clothes."

Mayuka pouted.

"All right then! Your big sister will lend you her best sundress!"

Kiyone pulled a dress with a gently flared hem from her bag.

"And I'll lend you a ribbon. Stand still while I tie it."

Mihoshi took a pin between her lips and started combing Mayuka's hair.

"Mayuka, what are you up to?" Sasami and Ryo-Ohki came to peek.

"There — done!"

"Wow...!!"

Sasami's eyes went wide.

The summer sundress suited Mayuka's slender figure beautifully.

"Mayuka, it looks great on you! So cuuute!"

"Really?"

Mayuka looked puzzled as she held the hem of the skirt in her fingers.

"Come on, the mirror's this way. See for yourself."

Sasami dragged Mayuka to the entry hall and pushed her in front of the mirror.

"Wow, it's lovely!"

Mayuka looked delighted and spun around, holding the skirt out.

"I'm going to show Papa! Where's Papa?"

"Oh, isn't he cute? Tenchi is upstairs."

Washu appeared from the kitchen.

"Okay!"

Mayuka ran up the stairs barefoot, pattering all the way.

"She's cute, isn't she. It feels like looking after a little girl."

Kiyone smiled as she watched Mayuka go.

"She's such a sweet girl. Tenchi should just be more openly happy about it."

"Tenchi isn't you. If a daughter his own age suddenly appeared, of course he'd be surprised."

Kiyone laughed as she gently reminded Mihoshi, but then thought about it again for a moment.

It hadn't even been half a day since Mayuka's shocking appearance.

And yet she seemed right at home in the house and family, as though she had been there from the beginning.

"Maybe she was just born that way..."

"Sasami likes that big sister!"

Sasami looked happily at Washu.

She feels more like a peer the same age, but she's cute.

"I think she'll be a good friend for Sasami."

Washu picked up the brush that had been used to comb Mayuka's hair and quickly picked out a strand of silver hair.

"Is this the girl's hair? Right?"

"Oh dear, so young and already going grey."

Mihoshi peered in.

"Well, I'll take it as research material. See you."

As if she had something in mind, Washu took the hair and went back into the lab.

"Haaah... to be saddled with a child at this age..."

And I've barely even had a proper kiss yet.

Tenchi lay flat on his back on the bed, staring blankly at the ceiling.

If that girl were a relative or something it would have been fine.

"I genuinely don't understand why she keeps insisting she's my daughter. Who is she, really..."

It wasn't surprising. It was like suddenly being called Papa by a classmate.

"But she probably doesn't have anywhere to go."

At least for tonight I need to let her stay.

But what about tomorrow? The day after?

...Which means another girl joining the household?!

Tenchi sat bolt upright in horror.

Oh no — another secret he couldn't explain to his friends was piling on.

"Whatever happens, happens. I suppose that's just my life."

Tenchi said it with what was not quite determination, but at least resolved to table the problem for now.

I'll just treat her normally, same as Ryoko and Ayeka.

Gradually she'll get along with everyone, probably.

A little bit worried, though...

While Tenchi was shut in his room, Ayeka and Ryoko flanked the door like guard dogs, glaring down the staircase with the resolve not to let a single soul pass.

Their vigil paid off.

A cheerful intruder came clattering up the stairs.

"Oh, Ryoko! Ayeka!"

Mayuka seemed to have completely forgotten about being chased just earlier, and smiled brightly as she held out her skirt hem.

"Look! Pretty, isn't it? I came to show Papa. Is he in his room?"

"What did you say?"

Ryoko glared with the look of a guard dog.

"Please don't bother him. Tenchi is feeling unwell at the moment," Ayeka answered coolly.

The shock of the hot spring earlier was wearing on her sensitive heart.

"R-really...?"

Even Mayuka couldn't push any further than that.

"Then I'll go back downstairs."

Ayeka completely stonewalled Mayuka, but watching her trudge dejectedly down the stairs made Ayeka feel vaguely as though she had bullied a small child.

"...That girl! There's no way she's Tenchi's daughter!"

Ryoko kept her gaze fixed straight ahead and didn't move a muscle.

"She said Papa's not feeling well," Mayuka reported.

"Huh? Tenchi is?" Sasami quickly sensed that Mayuka had been given a hard time by the older girls, but there was nothing she could do about that.

"I see. Then want to play with Sasami?"

"Yeah!"

Mayuka finally smiled and ran happily over to Sasami's side.

"What do we play?"

"I wish we could go to the pool..."

Sasami looked a little resentfully at the baking afternoon sun.

"Origami? Have you done it before, Mayuka?"

"Uh-uh."

"Then Sasami will teach you! Tenchi and Mr. Nobuyuki taught me, when I first got here. Look — a crane!"

"Wow!!"

Mayuka's eyes went wide.

"I want to try! Teach me!"

"Can I join in?"

Bored Mihoshi came over with a smile.

"Mayuka is such a mysterious girl. It feels like the whole house suddenly got brighter."

"She's so energetic!"

Sasami started folding a crane slowly from the beginning.

"You're staying, right? You're not going anywhere? If you stay it'll be so much fun. Tenchi can take us to the beach, or the amusement park. Mr. Nobuyuki has tons of great manga too. We can go shopping together, and cook, and do fireworks. I'm so glad you came, Mayuka."

"Mayuka is glad too!"

An innocent smile spread across her face.

"I really like Sasami. I like you second most after Papa! Can we be friends?"

"We already are. Tomorrow and the day after and forever — friends!"

"Yay! I'm so happy! I just want to squeeze you!"

Mayuka hugged Sasami tight, and Sasami smiled back, a little embarrassed.

"Promise! You'll stay here forever!"

"A promise?"

Mayuka tilted her head slightly.

"A promise... Startica..."

Her eyes drifted unsteadily through the air.

"That's right, the present! I have to give it!"

Mayuka jumped to her feet and came back with a small box in her arms.

"I'm giving Papa a present. A present I never got to give..."

She opened the small carved wooden lid, and a hologram bloomed upward.

The silhouette of a Christmas tree began to slowly rotate in time with a music box melody.

"So beautiful... it's like Christmas."

Sasami gazed dreamily at the silhouette.

"Yeah..."

Mayuka's eyes drifted through the air.

"A promise unkept... feelings unrewarded... a summer that was lost..."

"Mayuka, what's wrong?"

Mihoshi leaned in, puzzled.

Mayuka blinked and turned around.

"Huh? What? Did I say something?"

"Something about a promise."

Mayuka shook her head.

"No. I don't remember..."

"Take your time remembering. Alright?"

Mihoshi gave Mayuka a gentle smile.

The hologram slowly kept rotating, and the Christmas tree silhouette transformed into the silhouettes of people gathered around it.

Chapter Four:
"Where Is Katsuhito?"

"Where is Katsuhito?"

Kiyone called over to Nobuyuki, who was doing garden work while watering with a hose.

"Hm? He went back to the shrine, said he'd come back."

"That was quite something. Like a sudden typhoon coming."

"It really shook me."

Nobuyuki stood up with a grunt, wiping his sweat with his hand towel.

"Sorry, Kiyone. You're our guest and I've got you helping out."

"It's fine. I'm not good at sitting still. I'm just that kind of person."

Kiyone gave a refreshing smile.

"This may be overstepping, but what are you going to do about that girl?"

"Yes, that's the thing."

Nobuyuki looked up at the sky, squinting.

"She might have amnesia or there might be some other explanation, but for now we've decided to watch over her at home. Grandpa and I talked it over. Well — Tenchi is the way he is, so he seems quite confused, but."

"Tenchi is very serious, isn't he."

"Yeah. Unlike me, too rigid."

Nobuyuki let out a laugh.

"Today's Obon, you know. It might sound strange to tell you this, but — going to his mother's grave and coming back with a daughter — it's a mysterious thing... Even I thought I'd gotten quite used to strange things, thanks to Ryoko and all of you."

"We cause you so much trouble."

Kiyone lightly bowed her head.

"Though I suppose it's not really for me to say."

"No, no, it's not trouble. We're the ones who should be grateful — to be having this much fun every single day."

Nobuyuki looked away slightly, as if a little embarrassed.

"Everyone came to this house with their own circumstances, and became family... I sometimes wonder how long days like this can keep going."

"A new family member just arrived. What will you do if even more girls show up? Even for you, Mr. Nobuyuki, you'll go broke."

Kiyone laughed as she turned off the hose and tidied it away.

"Now, is there anything more I can help with? Kiyone and Mihoshi are not guests here — we're add-ons."

"Then let's go fetch something for dinner. Thanks to Washu's super-miracle-something-or-other, we have more vegetables than we can ever eat."

"Sure!"

Nobuyuki and Kiyone walked side by side toward the garden.

"Why does nothing go right?" Washu brooded in front of her monitor.

The analysis device held the silver hair she had found just a moment ago, but on the monitor the words 'ANALYSIS FAILED' blinked over and over.

"I can't read the gene structure at all — at any rate, she's definitely not from Earth."

Unfortunately, it doesn't seem she's any one of us either... she thought to herself.

"You certainly married something extraordinary, Tenchi."

This extraordinary something might not even be human.

It was possible that someone had sent her deliberately.

That possibility could not be ruled out.

"Let's try other approaches. I'll definitely unmask your identity — you'd better prepare yourself."

Washu gave the monitor a light tap and smiled.

The afternoon sun slowly tilted, and without noticing, the sound of cicadas had shifted to evening ones.

In the living room, Sasami and Mayuka had fallen asleep side by side with origami scattered all around them.

The music box lid was still open, but the hologram and the music had both stopped.

Perhaps they had fallen asleep while standing guard, for upstairs in front of Tenchi's door Ayeka and Ryoko had completely dozed off.

"Tenchi... no, don't worry about that girl..."

Ayeka murmured, dreaming of something.

Ryoko, asleep with her back against the wall, shifted slightly.

Papa... Papa, where are you?

In the darkness, a small girl of about five or six was sobbing.

Where should I go? Why has everyone gone away?

The girl walked unsteadily forward with eyes full of tears.

Ryoko stood motionless in the darkness, watching the girl set off.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see that the path the girl was walking ended abruptly.

Cut off entirely, with a pitch-black abyss gaping open.

Dangerous!

Ryoko leaped forward and grabbed the girl by the collar just in time.

The girl went rigid with shock, then timidly looked up at Ryoko.

Mama...?

Ryoko was startled and involuntarily let go.

The girl's face was the spitting image of Mayuka.

I don't know you! I'm not your mama!

The girl's face crumpled, on the verge of tears. She desperately reached out her small hands.

Mama, stay with me. Let's look for Papa together.

When she found Ryoko's hand, the girl finally relaxed and her face broke into a smile.

The small hand gripped Ryoko's hand tightly.

The feel of that warm, damp little hand — and Ryoko couldn't say a word.

She had been like this too. Until she met Tenchi — until she was firmly held and embraced.

Suddenly the girl's head leaned against her.

Ryoko stood still, unable to handle the two feelings fighting inside her — the urge to shake the little hand off and leave her alone in the dark, and the urge to take her hand and lead her out of this darkness.

Do you like me?

Suddenly a voice echoed from the darkness.

Ryoko's eyes snapped up. The girl was gone, and Ryoko was standing holding the hand of the grown Mayuka.

I hate you!

Ryoko shuddered and shook her hand loose.

What are you here for? What are you scheming, playing the child? You won't trick me!

I haven't changed — Mayuka's face crumpled.

Why are you angry? I only wanted someone to hug me. Just like you.

Just as Ryoko was about to cry out, Mayuka and the ground she was standing on vanished, and Ryoko was left alone in the darkness.

Her heart was pounding with fear.

Tenchi...!

Someone's hand gently drifted over Ryoko's head and passed by.

Oh, it's Tenchi. He was nearby after all.

Ryoko relaxed and sank back into sleep.

"...What a handful."

Tenchi tiptoed quietly down to the ground floor. He had noticed Ryoko sleeping like a child and couldn't help patting her head.

Looking into the living room, he found Sasami and Mayuka sleeping side by side, worn out from playing.

"Everyone's asleep."

Tenchi went through the hallway and stepped outside.

The lingering heat from the day's scorching temperatures was still very much present, but a slight breeze seemed to have come up, and he heard the wind chime ringing at the eaves.

Mayuka — Mayuka — wake up.

The music box with its lid still open suddenly gave off a light.

Yuzuha's face rose up like a hologram.

Find the prince — go looking for him.

Mayuka scrunched her face as if having a bad dream.

The voice was gentle, but it carried an irresistible resonance — issuing commands directly into the heart.

Wake up!

As if drawn by those words, Mayuka opened her eyes.

They were out of focus.

Mayuka stood up with a vacant expression, and quietly left the room.

The folded paper crane on the floor made a quiet crumpling sound as it was stepped on.

Ryoko woke with a start.

Her heart was pounding from waking so abruptly.

She spent a while with a blank look on her face, not quite understanding what had happened — then gently opened the door and peeked into Tenchi's room.

Tenchi was gone.

A rush of anxiety came flooding in, and Ryoko instantly teleported down to the ground floor.

She noticed the carefree sleeping face of Sasami on the tatami in the living room — but Mayuka was nowhere to be seen.

"Papa?"

Tenchi, who was out in the garden, turned around. Mayuka in her sundress was standing there.

"Oh, Mayuka, you changed."

Mayuka gave a bewitching smile, and slipped quietly up beside Tenchi.

She wrapped her arm through his, looking up at him from below with an inviting glance.

"Come here..."

Her arm tugging at his, Tenchi staggered slightly.

"W-what?"

"Nothing."

She glanced back briefly.

"Come on. This way."

Maybe she wants to show me something?

Tenchi thought it was strange, but Mayuka was being so insistent that he went along helplessly with her.

Mayuka's footsteps grew faster and faster until she was almost running. She climbed the stone steps as if possessed.

"What's going on?"

And then, Mayuka suddenly stopped.

It was the landing halfway up the steps.

"Why here... is something wrong?"

Mayuka turned in silence, her eyes wet and luminous fixed on Tenchi.

Her eyes were wavering, as if unfocused.

"Mayuka?"

"Do you like me?"

Suddenly Mayuka flung herself against him.

In the instant Tenchi tensed in surprise, Mayuka's lips brushed against his.

"Hold me..."

Eyes so heartbreakingly tender that the words escaped him.

This time slowly, she pressed her lips to his again.

No, Mayuka —

Mayuka wound her arms around him and held him.

Sudden dizziness came over him, and Tenchi instinctively tightened the arms he'd wrapped around Mayuka's body.

The sky was going dark with alarming speed.

His consciousness was growing thin.

Why... what are you doing to me...

Though the sky should have still been plenty bright, it was this dark — perhaps his senses were going wrong.

Let's go together, Papa...

The ground below was being swallowed in darkness... falling... falling...

Tenchi's consciousness broke off and his strength drained away.

From above, Ryoko spotted Tenchi and caught her breath.

The space around them was peeling away like a thin membrane, becoming a ring of light that enclosed the two figures.

The pair in each other's arms grew gradually more translucent, as if they were fading away from this world.

"Tenchi!!"

At that moment, the second alarm of the day rang through Washu's lab, and an unearthly presence raced through the main hall of Masaki Shrine.

"The alarm again!"

Washu confirmed the coordinates on the monitoring device and furrowed her brow.

"It's probably the same location as this morning. I need to investigate..."

Katsuhito snapped his eyes open and rose to his feet.

"Who is there?!"

As if on cue, the presence vanished and the sound of cicadas returned.

"Tenchi!"

Just as Ryoko was about to land, the spatial distortion disappeared and ordinary dusk returned.

"Huh... what just happened to me?"

"Huh?"

Tenchi and Mayuka were still holding each other, staring at each other in a daze — and hastily stepped apart.

"Oh... I..."

Mayuka's cheeks flared hot.

"Mayuka, just now—"

Before he could finish, Mayuka cut him off.

"I don't know... What was I doing?!"

Her face was frightened as she backed away, then spun and ran.

Three steps later she ran straight into a wall.

"What's the hurry?"

Ryoko appeared.

"Running from your beloved Papa — Tenchi, can I borrow this one for a bit?"

"Huh? Oh... sure."

Ryoko scooped Mayuka up and floated gently into the air.

"Eek — Papa!"

"Ryoko!"

Tenchi ran over in alarm.

"Just going to show her around. That's alright, isn't it. Right?"

She flashed a grin and without waiting for an answer shot up into the sky.

"Kyaaaa!"

Mayuka's shriek trailed away behind them.

"Don't worry, I won't drop you."

Ryoko slowed down and descended toward Masaki Shrine, passing slowly over it.

"See that? That's Masaki Shrine — where Grandpa lives. Tenchi grew up here as a kid. His mother died when he was five, and he used to cry a lot."

She picked up speed a little and circled toward the graveyard.

"See those graves over there? The one with the canna flowers — scarlet and orange? That's his mother's grave. Do you remember the mother's name? Tenchi's mom?"

"Mother — mama?"

Mayuka looked up at Ryoko's face.

"No. I don't know."

Ryoko didn't say anything. She shifted her hold on Mayuka and flew high up into the sky.

"Scared?"

"Uh-uh... just a little."

Mayuka held tight to Ryoko's clothes, eyes wide as she looked down at the earth below.

"See that town over there? Those square buildings — that's the elementary school Tenchi went to. Way further on there's a bigger city, and that's where the high school Tenchi dropped out of is. This is Tenchi's hometown. The place he grew up. Even if it's just a little — can't you remember anything?"

Mayuka could do nothing but shake her head.

"You don't remember? You know nothing? If you really came from the future, what kind of house did you live in? Who was with you?"

"Ugh..."

Mayuka's lips trembled and the view below blurred.

"The day you were born... when is your birthday? What is your beloved Papa's birthday? Anything — just one thing. Please, remember!"

Ryoko's face was frightfully serious.

Mayuka felt a terror that made her whole body tremble.

"I don't know... I can't remember... I don't remember anything!"

The wind high in the sky mercilessly scattered Mayuka's tears.

Ryoko hung motionless in the air and looked into Mayuka's face with the intensity of someone making a last desperate wager.

"Who are you? What were you trying to do just now?!"

"I don't know... I really don't know..."

Mayuka's voice was trembling, but her answer was unmistakable.

Ryoko's head drooped heavily.

"Ryoko—?"

Something in Mayuka's chest suddenly grew hot.

She wanted to hold this person's hand — the way she held Papa's — wanted to squeeze her tight.

"Do you hate me? Have you started to hate me?"

"You're not Tenchi's daughter."

Ryoko lifted her head and answered quietly, but definitively.

All at once, the hands that had been holding Mayuka slipped away.

"Ah..."

For just a moment, it felt as if her body was floating on the wind.

"KYAAAAAAA!!"

Ryoko watched without flinching as Mayuka plummeted like a stone.

Chapter Five:
The Long Summer Day Faded

The long summer day faded into twilight, and even as it became time to prepare dinner, Mayuka still hadn't returned.
"I wonder where Mayuka-oneechan went... Ryo-chan, do you know?"

Ryo-Ohki, who had been eyeing a piece of carrot tempura at Sasami's feet, jumped up in surprise.

"Hey! I'm frying things here, that's dangerous."

"Mewww..." Scolded, Ryo-Ohki trudged out of the kitchen and stopped beside Ayeka. She stared curiously at the flickering candlelight of the Obon altar.

"Mya?"

At Ryo-Ohki’s voice, Ayeka looked up to find Ryoko sitting on a ceiling beam.

"Oh, Ryoko-san. Wasn't she with you?"

"She went back first," Ryoko answered curtly, stretching out lazily across the beam.

"I see..."

The conversation about Mayuka died there. Outside the entrance, Tenchi and Nobuyuki were lighting the *mukaebi* (welcome fire).

"Tenchi-saaan!" Mihoshi and Kiyone approached, flashlights in hand.

"We searched all the way to the elementary school, but..."

"I see. Sorry to make you look," Tenchi nodded disappointedly. "Where could Mayuka-chan have gone? I think I'm going to go look for her after all."

"Well, let's eat first. Kiyone-san and Mihoshi-san must be hungry too, right?" Nobuyuki nudged Tenchi toward the door. "I called Grandpa earlier; he said he'd look for her on his way here."

"Yeah..."

Tenchi was quiet during dinner. Mayuka’s absence weighed heavily on everyone; the usually boisterous dining table was uncharacteristically silent tonight.

"Say, Sasami-chan, there's no shrimp or fish tempura today?"

"Mihoshi-san, that’s because it’s Obon," Sasami smiled, looking relieved to have a distraction. "It’s called *shojin-age*. It’s the same kind of food they serve at temples."

"I see! Perfect for Kiyone’s diet," Mihoshi nodded sagely.

"Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?" Kiyone snapped immediately. "Must be nice to be someone who eats three meals a day plus snacks and naps without gaining an ounce." Kiyone, who had recently been worried about her waistline due to her nightly beers, glared enviously at Mihoshi.

"But... Kiyone, you've gotten so good at cooking since we started living together. The rice and pickles taste so good every morning and night."

"What’s that? Are you saying I don't cook anything decent? That’s because you spend all our money on useless junk!"

Kiyone couldn't help but snicker at the ambiguous compliment-insult.

"I went with Nobuyuki-san specifically to pick these vegetables for a big eater like you. Look, you have to eat your tomatoes too!"

"Ugh... I'll give the tomatoes to Kiyo-chaaan."

The usual bickering eased the tension slightly.

"Ryoko, did Mayuka-chan say anything?"

"Not really. Sasami-chan, seconds!" Ryoko seemed to be pointedly avoiding the subject.

"That's strange..." Tenchi glanced out the dark window. "I really should go. She doesn't know her way around here at all."

Tenchi didn't seem to remember a thing about what Mayuka had done to him earlier. *I knew it,* Ryoko thought. *And he hasn't even considered what it means that a girl claiming to be his daughter doesn't recognize the house where her own father grew up.*

If this isn't a trap, what is!? Everyone is just falling for her act because she seems innocent!

Ryoko suddenly stopped her chopsticks. "Why do you care so much? You were the one troubled by her earlier. She'll come back on her own eventually," she said coldly.

"I'm worried because she *hasn't* come back," Tenchi retorted, annoyed. "Amnesia or not, she just got here. It’s pathetic to think of her lost in the pitch-black mountains."

"Pathetic?" Ryoko stood up abruptly. "Then what about us, who are being jerked around by her? It’s been nothing but trouble since she arrived! Tenchi, stop being such a pushover!"

"You don't have to put it like that!" Tenchi fired back.

"I... I just don't know what to think of that girl," Ayeka murmured softly. "I don't think she's a bad person. But..."

Just then, the sliding door at the entrance rattled open, and Katsuhito’s voice called out.

"Is Tenchi here?"

"Grandpa!" Tenchi dashed to the door. Katsuhito was standing there with Mayuka, whose sundress was torn at the hem.

"Mayuka-chan!"

"Go on in. You're hungry, aren't you?" Katsuhito led her in, his hand on her shoulder. "I found her crying at the very top of a cedar tree. It was quite an ordeal."

"The top of a cedar!?" *What does that mean? Was it Ryoko after all...?*

At the entrance to the living room, the two were met with a storm of relief.

"Mayuka-oneechan! We were so worried!"

"I'm glad your grandfather found you."

Tenchi noticed that only Ryoko was looking away. "Ryoko! Did you do something to Mayuka-chan?"

Suddenly, Mayuka looked up sharply and ran toward Ryoko.

SLAP!

It was a resounding slap that made everyone in the room flinch.

"I hate you! I hate you so much!! You just want me to disappear, don't you!?"

Ryoko was momentarily stunned, clutching her cheek, but her eyes quickly flared with rage.

"Then just vanish! How dare you crawl back here? Don't you ever show your face in front of me again!" She shoved Mayuka back with all her might.

"Ah!"

"Get out! If you won't leave, I'll throw you out myself!" With a terrifying expression, Ryoko grabbed Mayuka by the collar and shook her.

"Ryoko, what are you doing!? Stop it!" Tenchi jumped in to intervene.

"W-what's wrong, Ryoko-oneechan!?" Sasami and the others were frozen by the intensity of Ryoko's fury.

"Tenchi, she's a fraud! You were in danger earlier! Why can't you see that!?"

"What are you talking about? What are you even saying!?" Tenchi's expression turned stern.

He really doesn't understand.

Ryoko felt her blood boil. *This makes me look like the villain! I should have finished it earlier. This brat should have just died...!*

"Tenchi, can't you trust what I'm saying? Do you prefer this fraud over me!?"

"Ryoko!!"

CRACK!

A sharp sound echoed through the room. Ryoko stumbled, clutching her cheek. *Why...?* Her wide eyes screamed the question.

"Ah..." *Crap! I didn't mean to swing...*

"Tenchi..."

The pain in her heart—being struck by Tenchi for the first time—pierced deeper than the sting on her cheek. The living room went dead silent; even Mayuka stood still.

"Ryoko."

Before he could say he was sorry, Ryoko turned her back on him. She didn't want to hear anything, didn't want him to say a word; her posture made that clear.

"Ryoko, listen to me!" Tenchi shouted, driven by a mix of guilt and frustration. *How did it come to this... maybe I've lost it. Ryoko is just worried about me. I know that. I'm not saying this isn't strange. But this girl... Mayuka isn't lying. I can tell just by looking in her eyes. Or is it... jealousy? Does she think my feelings have shifted to Mayuka?*

"I don't understand her either," Tenchi began, his voice pained. "It's the same for everyone—but I want to try my best to accept her. Do you know why?"

Ryoko remained stubbornly silent, her back still turned.

"Ayeka-san. Sasami-chan. Mihoshi-san... everyone came to this house that way. Right? Ryoko... you were the same."

Understand, Ryoko. I want to reach out and turn you toward me. I don't want to fight over this, Ryoko...

"Papa?"

Tenchi spun around to find Mayuka looking up at him anxiously.

"Sorry, Mayuka-chan. That's right..." Tenchi hesitated for a moment. It felt cruel to say this to a girl who believed so completely that he was her father. "You say you're my daughter, but I just can't see it that way. You're like everyone else... just a girl. So, please don't do anything reckless, okay?"

Mayuka's eyes widened. They trembled, looking as though she might burst into tears at any second. "I'm... I'm not Papa's daughter?"

Her cheeks flushed deep red. Tenchi couldn't tell what kind of change was happening inside her.

"Am I not allowed to call you Papa anymore? Will you hate me if I say Papa?"

Tenchi faltered. He glanced at Ryoko's back. For a split second, he thought about how cathartic it would be to just yell at the girl... but he couldn't do it.

"It's not that. I won't hate you. But... I'd prefer if you just called me Tenchi."

"Tenchi..." Mayuka murmured the name dreamily, as if calling for a lover. Her eyes, which knew no deception, wavered with a newly born emotion.

"Sorry for interfering!"

Ryoko turned around, her eyes flashing with unmistakable sorrow and anger. Tenchi didn't even have time to call out to her. She vanished on the spot, leaving only a bitter aftertaste in Tenchi's chest.

"Look, another failure!"

"That was fine. She captured the Prince's heart, didn't she?"

"No way. That was the face of someone who lost her own heart."

"That Ryoko one is dangerous."

"It was really bad when she found her out."

"But she's isolated now, right? It's Mayuka's win."

"The other woman isn't saying anything. Is she waiting to see?"

"Things are getting complicated because she's dragging her feet."

"Shhh! Yuzuha will kick you again."

In Yuzuha’s room, the dolls were chattering incoherently. Yuzuha herself was uncharacteristically silent, staring intently at the monitor. She was so still that she looked as if she were sleeping with her eyes open.

"Look, she's mad. She thought everyone would have a huge fight and break apart, but they ended up getting closer instead." The dolls, silent for a moment, began whispering again.

"No, she doesn't know what to do herself. Look, the original plan was..."

"Send in a bomb and—KABOOM! Big chaos!"

"That happened, didn't it?"

"Make the Prince go crazy with a lovey-dovey attack!"

"That's happening, isn't it?"

"Make the Prince swoon with the love-love effect!"

"She was so close..."

"Everyone gets mad and the family splits! Then grab the Prince!"

"That... hasn't happened."

"Right? That’s why she should have just done it herself from the start."

"Wait, wait. That would ruin the story."

"I'm saying her follow-through is weak. Instead of trying to enjoy the reaction, just go in and get him! That would have worked."

"I guess even Yuzuha has a soft spot."

Hee hee hee... A ripple of snickering spread through the room.

"Maybe she still likes Yosho."

"No, she’s fallen for the young Prince."

"Then at this rate, the *hitogata* (mannequin) will take him."

"She's got way more sex appeal than Yuzuha, who's short with huge ears—how unsightly."

"The hunter becomes the hunted..."

"Hand in hand, they elope—Ahaha!"

"And they lived happily ever after."

"And Yuzuha was left all alone again."

"Another seven hundred years as a sleeping beauty."

"Just like us. No progress at all."

"Shut up!!" Yuzuha stood up. You could tell she was so angry her silver fur was bristling.

"You talkative, useless things! Acting like you understand when you don't even have souls! Who was just talking!?"

Was it you? You? You?

Sharp claws pierced and tore through the dolls. In an instant, limbs were scattered and heads rolled. One was laughing and crying while sawdust spilled from its belly. Another was wailing despite feeling no pain.

"Hee hee hee... that tickles."

"I was only saying what Yuzuha was thinking."

"As if Yuzuha has a soul either!"

"Be quiet! This is what happens to you!" Yuzuha hopped onto the monitor. The center of the floor split open, and the incoherent, mangled dolls tumbled down.

"Whoa, the trash pit again!"

"I'm sorry! Forgive me!"

"Hmph!" The crack in the floor sealed perfectly, and the room was instantly spotless.

In a while, new—but identical—dolls would be lined up again. They would wait to return to the room and be bullied by Yuzuha once more. The outside could be regenerated as many times as needed. Since Yuzuha made them that way, that was how it would be.

"Stupid. Pushover. What kind of Prince is he? Why is he so kind!?" She spat out incoherent complaints, not much different from the dolls. "I was going to make him spineless, but the mannequin fell in love first!"

She wanted to torment him. She wanted to make Yosho pay. She wanted to shove them off a cliff!

"Yosho..."

The dazzling summer sunlight of that day shimmered in Yuzuha’s mind as if it were yesterday. She loved him more than anyone. She thought he was more beautiful than any gem. She wanted him from the bottom of her heart. To have him, watch him, hold him, sleep with him every night, kiss him... to live for eternity together. She would have traded the tens of thousands of years she had lived just for him. She wanted the Prince. The pure soul of that eight-year-old boy that existed only once in this world...

"Ugh... Prince..."

Yuzuha slid down onto the clean floor and growled like a beast. She curled up, pressing her forehead to the floor and digging her claws in. She wanted to cry. She wanted to cry and forget everything.

But Yuzuha, a creature of darkness without a soul, couldn't. To love, and to shed tears—those were graces granted only to creatures of light. Even if betrayed, they can be purified by tears. That is why they can love again and again.

"It’s sad..."

I am not allowed to love, nor to forget. Instead of loving, I imprison souls; instead of crying, I hate. Because I cannot forget, I continue to hate...

Then, suddenly, Mayuka’s innocent face crossed her mind.

She can do it.

Because she has half-human DNA, she can cry, laugh, and even love like a human.

Even though she's just a mannequin! Just a vessel!

A scorching jealousy spread through Yuzuha. *I'll break her soon. As soon as I have the Prince*. Once she decided that, she felt a sudden rush of excitement. With a sharp whistle, she summoned the monitor and began spying again.

Chapter Six:
"Not Human, Not Animal"

"Not human, nor animal. Not an amorphous lifeform... it doesn't fit into any category at all."

Washu murmured to herself, staring at a test tube containing a strand of silver hair. She had been cooped up in her lab ever since, skipping dinner entirely.

"How is it possible for there to be no DNA? Don't tell me this thing isn't of this world." She muttered irritably, though falling back on occult explanations was usually a sign she was exhausted. "If this is part of a living thing, then that thing isn't 'alive.' It’s the same as dirt, or a rock, or a fragment of a meteorite."

A soft knock sounded at the laboratory door.

"Who is it?" Washu’s voice was sharp with frustration.

"It’s just me." Katsuhito entered, carrying a dinner tray. "Forgot to eat and sleep again, haven't you? Sasami-chan sent this over."

"Ooh, vegetable tempura! Now that's what I needed!" Washu accepted the meal with delight. "Come to think of it, it is the Obon festival. Quite a lively way to welcome the spirits home."

"Well? Did you find anything?" Katsuhito peered at the test tube.

Washu shrugged instead of answering and threw a question back at him. "And you, Yosho? Do you have any leads?"

"No." Katsuhito shook his head. Silence hung between them for a moment.

"Actually, at 5:45 PM today, a second fluctuation occurred in the space-time continuum. The location was near the stone steps of the Masaki Shrine... right around where that girl was first sitting."

"I thought as much." Katsuhito turned fully toward Washu. "That’s actually why I came. I felt a presence at that exact same time."

Katsuhito and Washu leaned in close, beginning to speak in hushed, serious tones.

Ryoko sat by the edge of the pond, hugging her knees and staring blankly at the moon's reflection on the water. She had come here wanting to be alone, but her heart refused to settle. The wind, which had died down for a moment, picked up again, rustling the streamlined leaves of the Funaho tree above her.

"Why... why am I even here?"

She dipped her hand into the water, and the white moon shattered without a sound. *Maybe I'm just making a scene all by myself,* she thought bitterly. *Tenchi and everyone else want to accept that girl, and here I am, the only one treating her like an enemy...*

"Maybe I was just jealous..." Ryoko muttered self-deprecatingly.

Even if the girl turned out to be a fraud, so what? Deal with it when it happens. It would be better to wait until things were clear before thinking about it.

Tenchi, why are you so kind? How can you be that way? Even after what almost happened earlier...

"Maybe this is the right time to call it quits..."

Ryoko buried her face in her arms. She couldn't see Mayuka as a daughter. She couldn't be part of that family.

...I should be the one to leave.

Once she reached the conclusion she had been too afraid to face, Ryoko felt hollow. It was only natural. She had tried to kill the girl. It wouldn't be surprising if Mayuka hated her enough to want her dead in return.

I'll just disappear and watch over Tenchi from afar. At least... at least let me do that much. If I can't even do that, my heart will just die...

"Ryoko-san?"

The unexpected voice nearly made Ryoko jump out of her skin.

"Do you mind if I join you?" Ayeka approached timidly. Ryoko remained silent, turning her gaze back to the water.

"I wonder if I am being jealous... It's painful to look at Lord Tenchi's face..." Ayeka sat on a nearby rock, a single firefly landing on her hand. "I thought I was more of an adult than this. I thought if Lord Tenchi ever fell in love with someone else... I would simply return to Jurai without saying a word..."

The firefly suddenly took flight. Ryoko could feel the weight of Ayeka's struggle to suppress her sobs behind her.

"How strange. To be telling you such things, Ryoko-san." Ayeka raised her sleeve to wipe her eyes, the soft rustle of silk the only sound as she tried bravely to hide her tears.

"You idiot, you're overthinking it!" Ryoko stood up, deliberately wiping her wet hands on her clothes with a rough motion. "Do you really think Tenchi is that kind of guy? Sasami-chan would laugh at you!"

"Ryoko-san..." Ayeka started to stand, startled.

"Stop moping, it's annoying. I'm sick and tired of this whole mess. That's why you're losing to that girl!" Ryoko ranted without restraint, then flashed a grin. "Where's that usual high-and-mighty princess attitude, huh? I didn't know you were such a sensitive soul."

"Ryoko, really!" Ayeka blurted out a retort, then suddenly broke into a smile. "You say such things, but weren't you the one looking depressed just a moment ago?"

"Me? Hah!" Ryoko turned away again. "Better get back before they file a missing persons report. You are a princess, after all."

From down the path, Sasami's voice called out. "Sister! Where did you go?"

"See? There she is!" Before Ayeka could respond, Ryoko vanished.

"Sister!"

"I'm here, Sasami." Sasami ran up, out of breath. Ayeka quickly wiped her eyes and forced a smile.

"Listen, Dad says we're all going to do fireworks!" Sasami noticed her sister's eyes were a bit red. "...What's wrong? Where's Ryoko?"

"She was just here." Ayeka looked around. "I'm sure she'll come once the fireworks start. Come, let's go."

Ayeka began crossing the stepping stones, gently nudging Sasami along as the younger girl looked like she wanted to ask more.

"Fireworks, huh... sounds nice."

Sitting on a branch of the Funaho tree, Ryoko watched them go. Once they were out of sight, the sound of insects grew louder. A shadow fell across the water; looking up, she saw the clouds had thickened significantly.

"It's going to rain—"

The fickle moon peeked out again, illuminating Ryoko’s upturned face. With her lips slightly parted, staring at the moon in a daze, her expression could have been a sob or a smile.

"Mayuka-chan, hold it higher. Look, that’s dangerous!"

"Huh? Ow!" With a small *pop*, sparks flew and singed Mayuka’s finger as she stood distracted. She dropped the firework and instinctively sucked on her finger while Tenchi leaned in to check.

"Did you get burned? Let me see." He took her hand to examine it, just as one would with a child. "It doesn't look like a burn, but maybe we should cool it down?"

Tenchi’s forehead brushed against Mayuka’s.

"I'm fine!" Mayuka turned bright red and yanked her hand back.

"Eh?"

"Ah... sorry, Papa—I mean, Tenchi."

"Oh, no..." Because Mayuka was so self-conscious, Tenchi became awkward as well.

"Mayuka-chan, are you okay?" Seeing Sasami approach, Tenchi took the opportunity to retreat toward Ayeka. "That was rough. I shouldn't have said those things. Now she’s all weirdly conscious of me." He was essentially making excuses to hide his own embarrassment.

"She’ll get used to it soon enough," Ayeka answered smoothly, though she stole a glance at Mayuka with a complicated feeling. *No, no, I am the older one here. If I get angry, it will only trouble Lord Tenchi...*

"Look, Mayuka-chan! Look!"

Tenchi and Ayeka turned to see Sasami spinning a firework in circles. The afterimage created a beautiful ring of light, layered like a Christmas wreath.

"Wow, so pretty!" Mayuka was entranced. *I feel like... I've seen something like this before... a long, long time ago... maybe even before I was born...*

"Startica..."

Deep within the darkness of Jurai, Yuzuha was also staring blankly at a ring of light. Mayuka’s entranced consciousness and Yuzuha’s reminiscing consciousness synchronized, connecting across space-time.

They say two people who meet on the night of Startica will surely be tied together forever.

Inside Mayuka, a girl who looked exactly like her murmured dreamily.

"Who? Is that... not me?"

The scene shifted instantly, and Mayuka felt a freezing terror. A tall man in lavish clothing was about to swing a sword of light down at her.

Burn them all!!

A scream that wasn't her own pierced through her body. In an instant, Mayuka's consciousness cut out. A fountain firework shot up a pillar of light and sparks.

"Wow, so pretty! That's amazing, Big Brother Tenchi!" Sasami shouted excitedly.

"Japanese summers are so nice, aren't they?"

"Mm-hmm." Mihoshi and Kiyone were chatting like a scene from a commercial.

Mayuka's hand reached out and grabbed a bundle of fireworks, clutching them tight. Then, she started running.

"Eh?" Ayeka was the first to notice. "What are you doing!?"

With a possessed look in her eyes, Mayuka hurled the bundle of fireworks into the flames. Sparks immediately erupted, and a fire blazed up.

Pop! Pop-pop-pop! Bottle rockets exploded, flying in every direction.

"Look out!" Ayeka lunged at Mayuka, pulling her to the ground.

"Sasami-chan, get back!" Nobuyuki covered Sasami to protect her.

"Mihoshi-san, move!" Tenchi doused the fireworks with a bucket of water. White smoke rose with a hiss, and the sharp scent of sulfur filled the air.

"What on earth happened!? Mayuka-chan, what were you thinking!?"

Mayuka looked up, startled. "I... I..."

The flames—the ring of light—the girl who looked just like her—. Her memories were twisted and tangled; she didn't know what was what anymore.

"My head..." Mayuka tried to stand, but clutched her temples and slumped back down.

"Are you alright? You should head inside now." Ayeka gently took Mayuka's hand and helped her up. Just as a sudden gust of wind blew past, the rain began to fall in large drops.

"Tenchi. I'll clean up the rest, you go get the ladies settled for bed."

"Right—" Tenchi looked unconvinced, but he followed Nobuyuki's instruction and headed inside.

"Do you agree, Yosho? That the girl's behavior and the space-time fluctuations are related?"

The conversation in Washu's lab had been ongoing.

"Most likely. Ryoko saw something. She wouldn't have gone that far just out of jealousy."

"The problem is what she saw. But with Ryoko gone, we can't exactly ask her."

"True..." Katsuhito crossed his arms, the conversation reaching a stalemate. "Ryoko might not say anything. She's likely deeply hurt and thinks 'to hell with it.' It's understandable. Tenchi, who has never raised a hand to a girl before, struck her."

"Under any other circumstances, this would be a fascinating development," Washu said with a slightly wicked smile. "No, no, I'm not just making fun. What I mean is that this girl's appearance has caused a fluctuation in this household. It's more than just a love triangle or a misunderstanding over Tenchi. She is clearly bringing chaos. You could say she's stirring the pot. Who stands to gain if a rift forms in this family and their bond weakens? That's what I'm getting at."

"I see." Katsuhito smiled. "These young women, from all different backgrounds, have come to live here as one. From the outside, it's a miracle of a family. Sometimes even I think it's like a dream, compared to when it was just a grumpy old man, a father, and a grandson living a lonely life. Don't you think someone—even if they aren't an 'enemy'—might want to break that?"

Washu couldn't quite read Katsuhito's true intention. "Break it? You think the girl harbors a grudge?"

"No, no, not the girl. Someone beyond the space-time fluctuations. Their target is Tenchi." Katsuhito sipped his tea quietly.

"Hmm, I see where you're going. That's a reasonable deduction." Washu thought it over, toying with the test tube. "That's the thing. Until we solve this mystery, my hands are tied. Honestly, I didn't think it would be this difficult." *Even for the genius Washu-chan,* she added mentally.

"So, what's the plan?"

"There isn't one," Katsuhito answered nonchalantly. "Well, doing nothing is a plan in its own way. The opponent has already made one move. The second one will surely come soon. I have a couple of ideas, but it likely won't require my interference just yet."

Katsuhito left those cryptic words behind as he stood up. "That hair is an illusion." Before Washu could question him, he had already walked out.

"Alright, Mayuka-chan. All that’s left is to go to sleep."

Ayeka spoke gently. Futons had been laid out across the entire eight-mat room upstairs. In addition to Ayeka and Sasami, Mayuka, Kiyone, and Mihoshi were relaxing in their pajamas.

"I'm sorry for being so selfish." Mayuka was completely drained and somber.

"It’s alright. Are you feeling better now?"

"I’m... I’m scared of myself... If Ayeka hadn't helped me back then, something terrible would have happened. I’m so sorry."

"Mayuka-chan?" Ayeka knelt beside her. "It’s over now. No one was hurt, we were just a bit surprised. Everyone makes mistakes. It’s okay now, see?"

"Ayeka, you’re so kind... thank you." Mayuka looked up timidly. "Do you forgive me? Everyone?" She looked around anxiously.

"Cheer up, Mayuka-chan! No one’s mad at you. See!" At Sasami’s cheerful voice, Mihoshi and Kiyone both nodded.

"Yeah..." Mayuka finally managed a smile. "Sleeping together like this is fun."

"Right? Usually it’s just Sister, so it’s boring!"

"Oh, Sasami..." The room, filled with five girls, was instantly enveloped in a warm atmosphere.

"Hey, Sasami-chan. What’s Christmas?" Mayuka leaned in.

"Eh?"

"You mentioned it when you saw the music box. Want to see it again?"

"Yeah! I’ll show you some Christmas photos!" Sasami went to get an album while Mayuka went for the music box.

"Look, this was last Christmas. We took so many pictures." The album from the previous year was filled with happy photos from the party.

"I want to see too!"

"What, what? Let me see!" Mihoshi and Kiyone immediately crowded around.

"Look, this cake was a collaboration between me and Sister!"

"Oh, there’s a stain on Tenchi-san’s sweatshirt!"

"Didn't you knock over your juice? Don't you remember?"

"Ehhh, did I?"

A lively moment passed as they looked through the photos.

"Oh, this! It looks like Startica!" Mayuka pointed to the Christmas tree. She opened the lid of the music box with one hand. Along with a quiet melody, a hologram appeared. The silhouette of a large tree with star-like illuminations began to rotate slowly.

"Oh, Startica!" Ayeka murmured dreamily.

"What’s Startica?" Mihoshi tilted her head curiously.

"It brings back memories. I had completely forgotten since coming here, but it’s a summer festival in Jurai. Once a year... it’s a Juraian event that’s like a combination of Tanabata and Christmas here." Ayeka answered Mihoshi, but then a question occurred to her. "Say, Mayuka-chan. How do you know about Startica? Who gave you this music box? Could it be that you’re from Jurai..."

Mayuka slowly shook her head.

"I see... you still can't remember. Don't worry about it. You can take your time to remember. It would be nice if your memory was fully back by Christmas this year." Ayeka smiled kindly.

"Eh?" Mayuka looked up in surprise. "This year’s Christmas...?"

"Why are you so surprised? You’re going to be part of the family here. We’ll celebrate Christmas together, won't we?"

"Ayeka..." Mayuka’s eyes grew moist. "Really? Truly?"

"Truly. After all, you are Lord Tenchi’s daughter."

"Yay!" Sasami cheered. "Thank you, Sister! That's great, Mayuka-chan!"

"Yeah..." Mayuka rubbed her eyes briefly. "I’m so happy... my chest feels all tight. Ayeka, Mihoshi, Kiyone, Sasami—I love you all!"

"Sasami loves you too!" The two of them frolicked like children, holding hands.

"Now, now, it’s time for bed. Goodnight, you two."

"Goodnight!"

For a moment, Ayeka felt as though she had gained two younger sisters, and she found it rather amusing. In the darkened room, Sasami and Mayuka whispered and giggled for a while before finally falling silent.

"I wonder if this is what it feels like to have a daughter..." Ayeka murmured with a ticklish feeling in her heart. Looking at Mayuka’s sleeping face, she felt a soft warmth spread through her body. "Goodnight, Mayuka-chan." Ayeka closed her eyes and fell into a happy sleep.

Chapter Seven:
Late into the Night, Again the Rain

Late into the night, again the rain began to patter down again. Ryoko sat on the roof, staring silently up at the sky. When she closed her eyes, the humid wind and rain felt lukewarm as they dampened her skin.

"Ryoko?"

It was Tenchi’s voice! She instinctively looked toward the sound and locked eyes with him just as he climbed onto the roof.

"Have you been out here this whole time? You’ll get soaked." He approached her with precarious steps. Ryoko turned her face away.

"Sorry about earlier. I... I just panicked. I know you wouldn't seriously bully her. Mind if I sit?" Without waiting for an answer, Tenchi sat down and looked up at the sky, squinting against the raindrops. For a brief moment, the moon peeked through the fast-moving clouds. It was likely just a passing shower; if left alone, it would probably let up soon.

"Something about her bothers me... she’s similar, right? Having no mother. I remember my mom’s face and voice, but she doesn't remember anything—. Is that strange? Even though she's 'Mom,' I don't know who or where she is, and I don't know who or where that girl is either."

"Tenchi!" Ryoko snapped her head up. *You mustn't be so kind. Something terrible is going to happen. We have to kick her out*... The words were on the tip of her tongue.

"What, are you worried?" Tenchi smiled as he looked at her. "It’s okay. I can use the Light Hawk Sword and everything. Come to think of it, that sword of hers... I wonder what it was. Was it a Light Hawk Sword after all?"

"No. It wasn't! You're being tricked!" Ryoko blurted out. *How can I make you understand! The more I speak ill of her, the more you’re drawn to her.*

"She doesn't look like someone who would trick people, though. Ryoko, are you jealous by any chance?" Tenchi teased, peering into her face.

"I’m not joking. Don't make this a joke. Tenchi, if you were to..."

What’s wrong, Ryoko? Why the serious face? Tenchi’s expression seemed to say.

She didn't want to hand him over to anyone. She wanted to hug him right now and spirit him away to the edge of the universe where no one could reach them, far from any worries.

"You worry too much. It’s okay, Ryoko." Tenchi gently brushed the moisture from her hair. "See, you’re wet. You’ll catch a cold. Come on, let’s go inside. Okay?"

Ryoko’s chest tightened, leaving her speechless.

"Come on, Ryoko." Tenchi put his arm around her shoulder and gave her a gentle, soothing shake. His body heat radiated through the thin fabric of his T-shirt and onto Ryoko’s cheek.

"No... don't go..." Ryoko shook her head like a child and pressed her cheek against his chest. *I don't need anything else. You don't have to say a word. If only you'll stay by my side... that’s enough...*

The moon, which had briefly illuminated the two of them, was quickly swallowed by thick clouds. As if to tear them apart and mock Ryoko’s feelings, heavy raindrops began to fall from the dark sky.

"It’s almost time. I’ll break you soon. Your hearts, your souls, that house..."

Deep in the darkness of Jurai, Yuzuha murmured as if singing. "Your tiny happiness, your playing house, your precious bonds, your compassion—everything!"

The light from the monitors reflected in Yuzuha’s eyes, flickering like will-o'-the-wisps. Within the darkness of Jurai, harboring a heart darker than the void itself, Yuzuha’s silver hair bristled like a beast’s.

"It’s almost time, Prince..."

A ripple of fear spread among the stuffed dolls. Their reconstructed bodies were spotless, and their fresh fur smelled pleasant, but their fearful, fawning eyes remained unchanged.

"Hey, Yuzuha’s face..." one doll began, as if unable to bear the tension.

"Stop!"

"Don't talk!"

"You'll be killed!"

"She'll tear you apart again!"

The surrounding dolls whispered in unison, silencing the first. There was a faint sound of fur rubbing against fur in their haste, but Yuzuha didn't even look back.

In the deserted living room, the clock struck three. All the residents of the Masaki household were fast asleep. In the darkened Japanese-style room upstairs, Sasami and Mayuka slept side-by-side.

Suddenly, the lid of the music box slowly opened, and a quiet melody began to play. The Startica hologram rotated shimmeringly, casting a pale light over Mayuka's sleeping face.

"Ngh..." Mayuka furrowed her brow and groaned in pain. Her eyelids twitched as if she were trapped in a nightmare.

Mayuka—Mayuka!

Someone's voice was calling her from the darkness. Mayuka raised her arms, trying to push away the void covering her face. A viscous, elastic liquid pushed back against her arms.

Now, wake up. It's about time you were born.

The voice was soft, yet spoke with an undeniable authority.

You've grown enough. I've taught you plenty. Memories, language, feminine gestures... Now, wake up. Rise, and go.

Who? Are you Mama? I'm scared... As if Mayuka's inner voice had been heard, laughter echoed.

Mama? Did I teach you that word? You don't have a mother. The name Mayuka was borrowed from a dead girl. From a little girl I kidnapped long, long ago on the night of Startica. She died so quickly; I only got to play with her for a little while. I remember it because I was so frustrated.

Suddenly, she noticed a small figure standing by her pillow, looking down at her. Large ears covered in silver fur. Sharp fangs peeked from a mouth curved into a smile.

"Who told you to play nice!?"

A hideous form, neither child nor beast. Muddy green skin, with eyes burning red.

"You just need to do as Yuzuha says. You don't need to think about anything else! Now go. Go and kidnap the Prince!"

Mayuka gasped and looked up at the small figure. "Who!? Yuzuha...?"

Is this a dream? Or an illusion? My body won't move—I'm scared!

"Kidnap the Prince! Hurry, or I'll break you!"

Mayuka bolted upright. Her heart was pounding so hard it hurt. Where the beast-like figure had stood, there was only the open music box. *What was it—I feel like I was told something terrifying, but I can't remember.*

"Papa... I'm scared..."

Clutching the music box, Mayuka slipped quietly out of the room. The rain had stopped at some point, and moonlight was streaming into Tenchi's room.

"Papa..."

Right, I'm not supposed to call him Papa. Tenchi's words flickered through her mind. Mayuka placed the music box at her feet and gently rested her cheek against Tenchi's chest.

"I missed my chance to give you the present. I wonder if I'm not allowed to give it to you anymore..." Resting her head on his chest, she felt her anxiety slowly melt away. "But, I love you... I love Papa. I want to stay like this forever..."

The lid of the music box at her feet opened silently. The music began to play softly.

Now, do it!!

The moment she heard that clearly familiar voice, her head swam. Mayuka's consciousness cut out, and her eyes opened hollowly.

"Prince—"

Mayuka slid her fingers across Tenchi's chest and gently kissed his forehead. Like a predator catching the scent of prey, she climbed onto the bed and straddled him. Her lips sought his skin, and her fingers gently peeled back the towel blanket.

"Ngh..."

Tenchi's expression twisted in pain, and a groan escaped his lips. Was he still unable to wake because he was already being pulled into the darkness within his dreams?

Mayuka's lips slowly crawled down Tenchi's neck. Gradually, the air around them began to shimmer, and a ring of light started to rotate.

"Come. To the world of darkness..."

Yuzuha was suddenly standing by their pillows, a smirk on her face. As Mayuka wrapped her arms around Tenchi's neck and kissed him, their bodies began to float slowly into the air.

Just then, the door slammed open, and Katsuhito burst in.

"Who goes there!?"

Yuzuha snapped her head around. "You!?"

Katsuhito's eyes went wide. *I knew it... that monster from back then!?*

"It's been a long time, Prince. Or should I say, Yosho?" Yuzuha's eyes burned darkly. "I have no business with you. I've come for the Prince."

The ring of light narrowed, and the unconscious forms of Tenchi and Mayuka had almost completely vanished.

"Yuzuha... Yuzuha, was it!?"

A Light Hawk Sword appeared in Katsuhito's hand. "Wait! I won't let you take Tenchi!"

A sharp strike lashed out at Yuzuha. But her form vanished.

"Did I miss!?"

"Light Hawk Sword! So you're the same after all? Thinking you can just cut things away? You fool, Yosho! You're just like the rest of those Juraian royal idiots!"

Only her voice could be heard, like a curse. Then, the presence vanished.

"Tenchi!"

Ryoko appeared just as Yuzuha's presence faded. The control vanished, and Mayuka and Tenchi's bodies fell back onto the bed.

"Ouch... wait, Mayuka-chan!?" Tenchi regained consciousness.

"Ah... Papa!? Why am I—" *Why am I on top of Papa!?* Mayuka turned beet red and tried to scramble off, but Ryoko's hand shot out.

"What was that!?" Ryoko grabbed Mayuka by the collar with a terrifying expression. "I asked you what that was!"

"It... it hurts... let go." Mayuka shook her head desperately.

"Stop. The girl knows nothing."

Ryoko glanced at Katsuhito but didn't loosen her grip. "What were you planning to do to Tenchi? Well!?"

"I... I don't know... I really don't!"

"Ryoko, what's going on? I'm perfectly fine," Tenchi interjected, knowing nothing of what had happened.

"Tch!" Ryoko thrust Mayuka away in frustration and clenched her fists. "Liar! This is the second time. You tried to take Tenchi somewhere twice! I was going to kick you out, but I've changed my mind. Don't think for a second you're leaving this room until you tell the truth!"

"I..." Tears welled in Mayuka's eyes.

"Ryoko, it's useless." Katsuhito stepped in to stop her.

"Wait! I want to hear too." Washu peered out from behind Katsuhito. "Who was that just now? They had silver hair. You have no memory of that either?"

"I... I don't know! I really don't understand!" Mayuka grabbed the music box, pushed past Ryoko and the others, and ran out.

"Mayuka-chan!?" Tenchi was shocked and gave chase. Mayuka ran down the stairs crying.

"Don't go!" Ryoko caught him instinctively.

"What... Ryoko, you—"

"Don't go. You mustn't go."

The sound of the front sliding door slamming shut echoed through the house. He could have broken free from Ryoko to search for her. But her sheer seriousness held him back more than any words could.

"Alright. I won't go. But I'm going to look for her when morning comes. Ryoko, you'll come with me, right?"

"....." Ryoko could only nod.

In the morning, as expected, the house was in an uproar. Everyone was out in the yard, arguing as they tried to stop Sasami, who looked ready to run off and search right that second.

"What... Mayuka-chan is—"

"A being of darkness? She was a monster!?"

Mihoshi, Kiyone, and Ayeka knew nothing of last night’s events.

"It’s not her. The one controlling her is the monster. An apparition named Yuzuha who has lurked in the darkness of Jurai since ancient times—like a nightmare. I met her once, long ago. ...It’s an unpleasant memory." Katsuhito trailed off and looked away. Despite his words, he seemed to be reminiscing about the distant past.

"Nightmare?" Mihoshi and Kiyone looked at each other.

"They're also called succubi. The meaning is a bit different, but they're Western monsters that bring nightmares to people."

"Of course, this one is much more powerful. It likely belongs to a high-ranking class of Juraian demons. Changing form, manipulating human hearts, devouring souls... or so it’s said."

At Washu’s words, Katsuhito added bitterly, "That girl has a deep connection to Yuzuha. Because she’s being controlled, she has no memory of those times. It will likely be difficult to break that control."

"Katsuhito, you seem to know more." Washu prodded him mischievously. "If you had told us sooner, we wouldn't have had to go through all this trouble making incorrect hypotheses."

"I thought it couldn't be. I hoped it wasn't. But I remembered when I saw that silver hair. The day I met that monster... it was the night of Startica." Katsuhito’s expression darkened. "Unintentionally, it’s all clear now. The next time we meet, the Light Hawk Sword will do the talking."

"I didn't know. That girl was..." Ayeka trailed off, flustered. "A child of darkness. Was she a daughter who came from the world of shadow?"

Ryoko was right—. Tenchi murmured with an exhausted face.

"That’s right. She’s an enemy. It’s clear now, isn't it?" Ryoko replied bitterly.

"That's not right! If anything, that’s even more reason for us to help her. That’s too cold!" Sasami, who had been listening silently, shouted with eyes full of tears. "Sasami made a promise to Mayuka-chan. That she’d stay here forever and we’d play together. Sasami’s going to find her!"

Before Ayeka could stop her, Sasami ran off, quickly disappearing around the corner of the house.

"Sasami! Wait!" A shocked Ayeka chased after her.

"Grandpa, I’m going." Tenchi nodded to Katsuhito and began to run.

"If she targets you, use the Light Hawk Sword. I'll follow shortly." Katsuhito nodded back with a stern expression, then went over to Washu and began discussing something.

Chapter Eight:

What Did I Just Do?!

What... What did I just do!?

Mayuka stumbled along the dark mountain path, running blindly. Her feet repeatedly caught on the underbrush.

Tenchi’s stunned face, Ryoko’s terrifying expression, Katsuhito’s stern gaze, Washu’s cold detachment—and a monstrous, small face hooked into the corner of her memories—all swirled incessantly in her mind. She couldn't think straight. Her legs were covered in scratches from slamming into tree roots and plunging through thickets.

Papa! Help me!

Suddenly overcome by a wave of nausea, Mayuka skidded to a halt. Without realizing it, she had strayed from the path and into a bamboo grove. The wind rustled the bamboo leaves with a menacing sound that made her shiver. She stood there, drenched in cold sweat, gasping for breath.

Finally noticing a hard edge pressing against her solar plexus, she realized she was clutching the music box tightly in her right hand. Her feet were bare. Seeing the blood seeping from cuts and scrapes, Mayuka was aghast. She had bolted without even putting on sandals, yet she had made sure to grab the music box.

"What is... this!?"

Terrified, Mayuka almost threw the music box away. But she couldn't. The mere thought of letting it go filled her with intense anxiety. Suddenly, the melody of the music box echoed in her ears. A hologram rotated, casting small rings of light around her.

As a familiar voice rang out, a scene that had been fading from the edge of her mind returned with startling clarity.

She saw Tenchi’s face, eyes closed in pain. She saw herself leaning in to kiss him. The soft sensation of his lips. A sweet, trembling shiver that vibrated deep within her.

Kiss him, embrace him, press your skin to his, and open the dark door hidden deep inside... I become the door, I am opened, and I swallow Papa whole.

"Hurry up, or I'll break you!"

A tiny figure stood by her pillow, its mouth split wide as it screamed at her. A monster with large silver ears and green skin mottled with irritation looked down at her.

"Yuzuha!"

The moment that name burst from her throat, everything became clear.

I am not human. I am a doll created in Yuzuha's laboratory, born from a murky, jelly-like liquid through Yuzuha's magic and the power of darkness. My empty shell was stuffed with memories of Papa. I was a vessel designed to go straight to him, to wrap his soul within my hollow core and carry it away.

"Papa..."

Mayuka staggered out of the bamboo grove and began walking again. Just standing still made her skin crawl with fear. She would be found. She would be destroyed. She would never see Papa, or Sasami, or anyone ever again.

"I'm horrible... I did something horrible..."

Tears fell steadily as she walked. *I want to see you, Papa. But I can't anymore, can I?*

She didn't know how long she had walked or how long she had stood paralyzed by fear, but by the time she noticed, the night was beginning to fade into a pale dawn. Exhaustion and the morning chill finally stopped her. Thinking she couldn't take another step, her knees buckled.

In a clearing deep in the forest, the summer grass grew thick, inviting her like a comfortable bed.

"I want to die..."

Whether a doll could even die, or how to manage it, Mayuka no longer had the energy to consider. She just wanted it to be over. If she opened the music box, Yuzuha would surely find her. She would let Yuzuha destroy her. Then she wouldn't have to think about anything ever again.

"Goodbye, Papa..."

Mayuka placed the music box on the grass and gently opened the lid. As the quiet melody began to play, a vision of midsummer Startica—a place she could never have actually seen—burned behind her eyelids.

Ah, the sky is so blue... just like the sky here when I first saw it. I came here to see something so beautiful—

It's okay now. I met Papa. I met Sasami. I met the whole family and ate dinner with them. I flew through the sky with Ryoko. Sasami taught me origami. We laid out the futons and slept together. Grandpa held me. Ayeka protected me. I took a bath for the first time... and I hugged Papa tight.

He called me "Mayuka-chan." He smiled at me with such kind eyes.

"Papa..."

Tears spilled from her tightly closed eyes and ran down her cheeks.

"So, you remembered."

A voice spoke suddenly, right next to her. "Things you weren't supposed to remember. Things I went to the trouble of sealing away."

Startled, Mayuka snapped her eyes open to see Yuzuha standing right beside her.

"You thought I'd destroy you? Idiot! Blockhead! Useless puppet!!"

Yuzuha's sharp claws struck Mayuka's cheek. "I'm not going to destroy you. I still have work for you to do. I made you for a purpose, so why are you crying in a place like this!?"

"Yuzuha!?" Mayuka's pupils dilated with terror.

"Why are you crying? Why didn't you do what Yuzuha told you? Shedding tears... you were planning to forget all about me, weren't you?"

With every swipe of Yuzuha's claws, blood sprayed from Mayuka's cheeks and arms.

"Agh!" Mayuka raised her arms, desperately trying to shield her face, but she didn't try to run.

"Just destroy me... make me disappear!"

"A mere doll dares to defy Yuzuha!?" Enraged, Yuzuha grabbed Mayuka by the hair. "Come! I'll hollow you out so you can never defy me again!"

Yuzuha's eyes flashed with a sharp light. As if responding to that light, Mayuka's chest began to glow.

"Ah..."

Mayuka clutched her chest, her body trembling in agony. Between her fingers, a glowing crystal was visible through her skin. Her eyes flew wide, then her head snapped back. Her pupils reflected nothing.

"There, there, good girl... Now, you'll never be able to cry again, will you?"

A terrifying hatred shimmered beneath Yuzuha's controlled tone. She supported Mayuka's neck and slowly raised her head.

"Now, look! You're going to bring me the person you hate most. The person you despise."

"Yes, Mama."

Mayuka's hollow eyes stared forward without blinking.

At that moment, the sound of footsteps trampling through the brush approached, and a small figure ran toward Mayuka.

"Mayuka-chaaaaaaan!!"

Mayuka looked down at Sasami with a blank expression.

"What's wrong? Why are your eyes so scary? Hey?" Sasami spun around and glared defiantly at Yuzuha. "Are you Yuzuha? What did you do to Mayuka-chan!?"

"So you're the little princess of the Juraian royal Family." Yuzuha looked Sasami up and down mockingly. "You're about my size. Do you use the Light Hawk Sword too?"

As she spoke, she signaled behind Sasami. "I'll take you. Tenchi loves you, doesn't he? Yes. You'll do perfectly!"

Suddenly, Mayuka's arms snatched Sasami.

"Kya!" Sasami was hoisted into the air. "It hurts! Mayuka-chan, let go! Put me down!"

"Sasami!?"

Ayeka, who had been following, burst into the clearing. "What are you doing!? Release Sasami at once!"

Ayeka immediately took a stance to cast a binding barrier. *This hideous creature must be Yuzuha. She must not escape*.

"And you're the older sister. Perfect. You can be my witness." Yuzuha thrust out her hand with a laugh.

Thump! An impact sent Ayeka flying back.

"Kyaaaah!"

"Ayeka-saaaaaan!"

Tenchi’s voice rang out nearby.

"Big brother Tenchi, help!" Sasami screamed as she struggled.

"Sasami!?"

By the time Tenchi reached the clearing, Yuzuha was already vanishing into a hologram. "Tenchi—no, Prince! I’m taking this child. If you want the way, ask that old man of the Juraian Royal House!"

Yuzuha vanished, and Mayuka and Sasami were about to disappear as well.

"Wait!" Ryoko appeared via teleportation and tried to lunged at Mayuka. But suddenly, the ring of light and Mayuka’s form vanished completely.

"Ayeka, stay with me!"

"Dammit, she got away!" Ryoko cursed as she walked back.

"Ryoko, Ayeka is... please. Can you go call everyone?" Tenchi looked up, his face pale.

"Wait here!" Ryoko nodded and teleported away.

"I’m sorry. This is my fault—"

Tenchi knelt beside the unconscious Ayeka and didn't move. Mihoshi, Kiyone, Katsuhito, Washu, and Ryoko surrounded them.

"Mya..." Ryo-Ohki, having lost the young mistress who pampered her most, sadly licked Ayeka’s cheek.

"If I had just listened to Ryoko, Sasami wouldn't... and Ayeka wouldn't..."

"Not necessarily, Tenchi. This was bound to happen sooner or later. It might have been you who was gone and Ryoko lying here unconscious instead." Washu offered comfort with a calm face.

"What should we do? How do we get to the other world?"

Mihoshi spoke up timidly. "Um... Tenchi? We were looking for a medium. Something Mayuka-chan wore, like her clothes or shoes... if we have that, it might help open the door."

"Actually, we were looking for that music box she had. But it’s gone," Kiyone added.

"Music box?" Tenchi looked around. "If it’s the music box, it’s right there. Why would..."

"So she did bring it." Washu picked up the music box, which was nestled in the grass. "This is it. This acted as a short-circuit between dimensions. I thought we wouldn't find it, so I prepared another device, but with this, we can open the door immediately."

Washu took out five small pyramid-shaped gadgets and set them in a circle around the music box. As the lid of the music box opened, light raced between the pyramids, and a star-shaped pillar of light rose up.

"There. The problem is that a door forced open from this side is unstable. I don't know how long the barrier will hold."

"Thank you, Washu." Tenchi nodded and walked quietly to the barrier. "Grandpa. Ryoko. Take care of Ayeka."

"Wait. I will go." Katsuhito stopped Tenchi. "Beyond this door is a world of darkness. The power of Jurai may not reach there. That girl has likely become a being of shadow already. You don't know the darkness of Jurai. If you enter, you might lose yourself."

"Grandpa?" Tenchi was confused. "Why you? Is there a reason...?"

"It’s atonement for doing nothing." Katsuhito smiled. "I know Yuzuha. I can handle her. If I can't use the Light Hawk Sword, I’ll take her down with my own hands."

"Are you going to kill Mayuka?" Tenchi pressed him.

"Yes." Katsuhito’s expression darkened. "She will likely launch a fierce attack alongside Yuzuha. There may be no choice but to kill her. If you show mercy, you’ll be the one who dies."

"No!" Tenchi shouted. "Killing her... please, let me go! There must be another way. She cared for me so much..."

"I can't allow it! You are the Prince of Jurai. If I don't protect you, your future—"

"You’ve grown old, Yosho."

At Washu’s voice, Katsuhito turned in surprise.

"Don't you trust Tenchi? Or are you pretending not to understand his feelings because your conscience is bothering you? Are you angry at yourself for failing to kill Yuzuha? A person's future isn't something to be protected. It’s something they create for themselves, isn't it? If you go with that mindset, it’s dangerous."

Washu stared at Katsuhito as if seeing through his heart. "You must not go. If Funaho were here, I’m sure she would say the same."

"Lord Tenchi... Sasami..." A weak voice spoke. Ayeka had regained consciousness.

"I know. It’s okay, don't worry." Tenchi smiled. "Grandpa, I’m sorry. I’m going."

"I’m going too. I have a debt to settle with her," Ryoko said with a grin. "There seem to be some messy details I don't even want to hear, but you’re better off staying behind, old man. You’ll just be in the way."

"....." A rare moment of hesitation flickered on Katsuhito’s face. "Forgive me, Tenchi." His doubt turned into quiet resolve. "I’ll leave it to you. Do as you see fit. I’ll be waiting."

"Yeah."

"Wait, Tenchi!" Mihoshi ran up and placed a small paper crane in his hand. "Mayuka-chan made this. Take it with you."

It was a clumsy paper crane made of sky-blue origami paper.

"Thank you."

Without looking back, Tenchi stepped into the barrier.

Chapter Nine:

The Moment They Crossed the Threshold

Chapter 9: The Moment They Stepped Through the Door

The moment they stepped through the door, Tenchi and Ryoko felt their bodies float. A sensation of sliding endlessly down a long, spiraling passage made Tenchi’s nerves grate.

How far had they fallen? How long had it been?

The sound of bells began to drift toward them. A jingling sound like a tambourine, accompanied by the low, steady rhythm of a bass drum. Recorders, violas, and string instruments performing chromatic glissandos. An endless stream of singing—words that made no sense in a language he didn't recognize—flowed past them.

A parade...

For some reason, an image of a procession in vibrant folk costumes flickered in his mind. Perhaps it was the music, reminiscent of a program he'd once seen about the Silk Road.

When Tenchi finally came to, he was lying on his back in a room that felt like the bottom of a deep well.

"Huh...?"

The ceiling was so high he could barely see it. If they had fallen from that height, he should have broken every bone in his body, yet he felt no pain at all.

"Ryoko? Ryoko!"

He shook Ryoko, who was lying face-down right beside him.

"Where are we?"

Ryoko sprang up, immediately scanning their surroundings. What Tenchi had mistaken for the stonework of a well were actually countless monitors of various sizes. Each one displayed a different, vivid close-up of what looked like flowers.

"What is this? ...Whoa!" Tenchi recoiled instinctively.

What he thought were flowers were actually cross-sections of what looked like internal organs. They appeared to be alive, trembling and pulsating.

"Those are the inside of our bellies—"

Tenchi spun around. At their feet, a swarm of stuffed animals had gathered. From the large to the small, they all stared up with wide, wet, black eyes.

"—Just kidding!"

As if that phrase were a signal, the dolls attacked all at once.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!"

"La Startica Edio!"

"Idiot! That's wrong! You have to say Merry Christmas!"

Sharp blades began to slide out from the bellies and limbs of the stuffed toys.

"Get back!"

Ryoko stepped in front of Tenchi. "Are these enemies? Where is Yuzuha!?"

Her aura blade flashed, cleaving through the dolls.

"Yuzuha is—decorating for the party—and she's very—very busy—"

"She told us to play with you."

"It's called the Startica Christmas Project."

"Giving presents, receiving presents, feasting, being feasted upon."

"Playing, being played with, falling, being dropped."

"Moron, those last two are the same thing!"

The dolls kept up their nonsensical chatter as they lunged for Tenchi's arms and legs.

"Ngh..."

A small doll managed to slip under Ryoko's guard and slashed Tenchi's arm.

"Dammit. The Light Hawk Sword..."

Tenchi tried to focus his mind, but between the constant chatter and the relentless attacks, he couldn't manifest the blade.

"Here we go! First wave attack!"

A group of dolls cornered Tenchi against the wall, flying at him with blades pointed forward. *Thwack-thwack-thwack!* They embedded themselves in the wall just a hair's breadth from his skin.

"Whoa!"

"Tenchi! Are you okay!?"

In his panic, Tenchi tripped over a doll and fell backward toward a cluster of upward-facing blades. *This is it!* But the blades suddenly retracted, and Tenchi's body simply bounced off the soft bellies of the dolls.

"Second wave attack!"

A massive pile of dolls jumped onto Tenchi's back, bouncing up and down.

"Wh-What is this!?"

"Dammit, they're just mocking us!"

Ryoko’s aura blade swept through a large group of them.

"Third wave attack!"

"Christmas Special~!"

The dolls began to bounce around, firing blades rapidly at Ryoko. This time, they showed no mercy.

"Tch... there's no end to them! We have to get out of this room!" Ryoko shouted as she parried the incoming blades and cut through the swarm.

"Oh, really? Then please, head for the trash chute."

The dolls cackled in unison, and the floor suddenly split open.

"Waaaaah!"

Falling into the abyss! The world went pitch black as Tenchi and Ryoko plummeted through an infinite darkness.

Ae-i-nu o-ni-ma a-re-a-ra-u

Su-ta-ti-ka e-di-o e-di-i-o

A-we-mu-i-i u-ka-a-ri-a-ya ri-i-vo

Su-ta-ti-ka e-di-i-i-o-oo

Ah, that song from before... Tenchi thought. *What kind of song is it? What does it mean?*

Our gathering in the dark, Merry Christmas

The dream that opens the door, Merry Christmas

A thin, clear singing voice drifted through the air. In the darkness, the figure of a young girl in red emerged.

"Mayuka...?"

The "red" he saw was a Christmas costume. A red dress trimmed with white fur, and a triangular hat topped with a pom-pom like a snowball.

"My favorite Papa! Welcome to the Christmas of the Dark Country!"

Mayuka looked at Tenchi with hollow eyes and gave a bright smile. Behind her, a massive tree flickered into view. Its sprawling branches looked exactly like a Tree of

Jurai. In the center of the thick trunk, someone was pinned with their arms spread wide.

"Sasami!?"

Tenchi lunged forward. Sasami didn't move an inch. Whether she was unconscious or... he couldn't tell from this distance.

"No! That's Yuzuha's prey!"

Mayuka’s eyes widened. With movements that were barely human, she jumped and landed right beside Tenchi.

"Papa, I love you!"

Her innocent smile caused Tenchi to hesitate for a split second. In that moment, her claws extended, and a sharp pain shot through Tenchi’s cheek.

"Tenchi!"

Ryoko’s aura blade swung at Mayuka. Mayuka effortlessly somersaulted away and smiled at Ryoko.

"Why are you here? Ryoko wasn't invited to the party!"

"Tch..." Ryoko’s face flushed with rage. "You brat... bring out Yuzuha!"

With a scream, she used her teleportation to strike at Mayuka.

"Ngh." Mayuka’s expression shifted. "I hate Ryoko! Go away!"

"I don't care what you think! Where is Yuzuha!? Tell me now or I'll cut you down!"

Mayuka moved with incredible speed; Ryoko’s blade only managed to slice through the air and Mayuka's clothes.

"I don't know. I don't know anything!"

Mayuka glared at Ryoko with eyes burning with anger, flexed her claws, and charged. While Ryoko attacked with brute force, Mayuka used a hit-and-run tactic, darting in to slash with her claws the moment she saw an opening.

"Sasami, hang on!"

The moment Mayuka’s attention was diverted, Tenchi ran to the giant tree. Sasami’s limbs were woven into the trunk by a web-like growth; he couldn't possibly pull her free with his bare hands.

"Sasami!"

Tenchi patted Sasami’s cheek, trying to wake her. Her skin was warm. There were no visible injuries or signs of torture, suggesting she was purely being held as a hostage.

"Ryoko! I need help here!" Tenchi shouted.

Whether it was the thick, dark atmosphere or the steady, rhythmic music playing in the background, he simply could not manifest the Light Hawk Sword.

I was a fool. I underestimated this world—! Tenchi gritted his teeth in frustration as he tried to unweave the web one strand at a time. He should have brought a knife, at least. Coming here with bare hands, relying entirely on the Light Hawk Sword...

"I told you no. Didn't I just say no? Do you want to make Mayuka sad that much?"

A voice whispered in his ear, and suddenly he was grabbed by the collar and hurled away.

"Mayuka!?"

Her Christmas costume was in tatters, her skin showing through the gaps in the fabric.

"This is troublesome. Ryoko is violent, and Papa won't listen. I need a new dress!"

A glowing crystal appeared in the center of Mayuka’s chest. Radiant lines spread out, covering her skin. As the useless Christmas outfit fell away, Mayuka’s body was encased in a sleek battle suit.

"Look! Isn't it cool!"

She spun around, showing off her striking proportions. Her claws were sharper than before, and triangular power seals—like war paint—were fixed to her face.

"Papa, let's play!"

Mayuka laughed as she pounced. "Look, a Light Hawk Sword. You bring yours out too, Papa."

Suddenly, a glowing blade appeared in Mayuka’s hand. She slashed with terrifying force, sending Tenchi scrambling backward onto the floor.

"I'm your opponent!" Ryoko cut in.

"Ryoko, move. I'm playing with Papa."

Mayuka charged, ignoring Ryoko’s aura blade. Their energies collided violently, sending sparks flying.

"Ryoko, you're slow. I'm much stronger."

Mayuka gave a wicked grin and pulled her hands apart. Her Light Hawk Sword split into two. The blades were shorter and much more slender.

"The Light Hawk Sword—split!?" Tenchi couldn't believe his eyes.

The two blades danced gracefully, quickly driving Ryoko back against the wall.

"Where should I hit you?"

The moment Ryoko turned her head away, the right-hand sword sliced the air by her ear. Her teal hair was shorn off, sliding down her shoulder.

"Here?"

A searing pain shot through Ryoko's right shoulder. Mayuka's left-hand sword had pinned her to the wall.

"Ngh..."

Ryoko's aura blade vanished. She gritted her teeth and pulled herself away from the glowing blade. *I'll stab her back!*

"See, you really are slow!"

Mayuka easily parried Ryoko's attempt with her right-hand sword and caught the other blade in her left. "Now, where next?"

"Mayuka! Don't kill her."

At the sound of the shrill voice, Mayuka immediately pulled back, leaping high into the air to retreat.

"Who's there!?"

"Hehehe..."

The source of the snickering was sitting on a tree branch, looking down at them with amusement. "You shouldn't. This is Yuzuha's country. You have no chance here, do you?"

"Yuzuha!!" Ryoko shouted.

"That's right, Yuzuha. Come here, Mayuka."

Mayuka jumped and landed beside Yuzuha, crouching on the branch like an obedient leopard.

"This is my daughter. Did you like your out-of-season Christmas present?"

"What do you mean?" Tenchi asked, bewildered.

"I mean this girl. Young Prince, wasn't it fun having a daughter?" Yuzuha grinned, looking utterly delighted. "I thought of it myself. I caught a glimpse of your Christmas, you see. You have some quite lovely customs over there. So, I decided I wanted a present too."

"What are you talking about!?" Tenchi shouted in frustration. He couldn't reach them from down here. And without the Light Hawk Sword, he had no way to attack even if he wanted to.

"Oh? Is the Prince of Jurai a bit slow? I gave you the gift of a wonderful time, so now it's your turn to give me something. Prince, I'll be taking your soul!"

The moment Yuzuha finished speaking, a strange sound—like thousands of angry snakes hissing—filled the room. From the walls and the base of the tree, millions of ribbons came slithering toward them. They were multicolored, smooth, and dreamily beautiful.

That was what Tenchi thought, right up until the moment the ribbons reached their feet.

"Whoa!?"

The ribbons climbed their bodies with unbelievable speed, weaving a complex and beautiful pattern that bound them tight in seconds.

Zip! They were both hoisted into the air.

"There, much prettier!"

Yuzuha floated over to Tenchi and flicked a small bell sewn onto the ribbons. *Chime*.

"You... you're mocking us!" Ryoko thrashed in fury.

"I'll sew that mouth shut!" Yuzuha glared at her.

As if malevolent energy had been fired from her eyes, Ryoko's body trembled. "Wh-What... are you doing..."

"Nothing much. You were just being loud, so I drained a tiny bit of your energy."

"Tch... dammit!"

An aura blade poked through a gap in the tightly woven ribbons. In one stroke, the blade shredded the bindings, and Ryoko was free.

"You! I won't forgive this!"

Yuzuha pulled back in surprise and fled into one of the many caves lining the walls.

"Tenchi, you okay?"

The aura blade sliced through Tenchi’s restraints as easily as paper. Catching Tenchi before he could fall, Ryoko dived into the cave where Yuzuha had disappeared.

"Hook, line, and sinker!"

As they reached the exit of the cave, Yuzuha’s voice rang out, and they were suddenly hurled back into the open air.

"Go! Mayuka!"

At her command, Mayuka attacked. Her twin swords flashed. Tenchi could barely do anything but protect himself. The moment the violent impact knocked the wind out of her, Ryoko lost consciousness.

"Ryokoooooo!"

Tenchi and the unconscious Ryoko fell straight into a giant beaker.

Chapter 11: "Tenchi! Ryoko!"

"Tenchi! Ryoko!"

The voices of Ayeka and the others echoed through the Masaki household.

Outside, the rain had finally stopped, and the thick, oppressive clouds were beginning to break. A soft, pale light—the first sign of the sun returning—filtered through the gaps, reflecting off the wet leaves and puddles in the yard.

Sasami was the first to emerge from the passage, still clutching her chest, her eyes red from crying. Behind her came Ryoko, leaning heavily on Tenchi’s shoulder. She looked exhausted, her usual sharp energy replaced by a weary, hollowed-out expression.

"They're back! They're safe!" Mihoshi cheered, waving her arms frantically.

Washu, standing slightly apart with her arms crossed, let out a long sigh of relief. Her eyes immediately went to Tenchi, scanning him for injuries.

"Lord Tenchi!" Ayeka rushed to his side, her eyes brimming with tears. "I was so worried... I thought for a moment that even the power of the Royal Tree wouldn't reach you in that darkness."

Tenchi didn't say anything at first. He gently helped Ryoko down onto the porch steps. His clothes were still tattered, and his face was pale, but the light of the Light Hawk Sword had left a calm, resolute aura around him.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the two halves of the shattered crystal. They were dull now, the inner light that once animated Mayuka completely extinguished. Beside them lay the crumpled, blood-stained paper crane.

"She's gone," Tenchi said softly, his voice barely above a whisper.

The atmosphere among the group shifted instantly. The joy of their return was tempered by the weight of what—and who—had been left behind in the world of shadow.

"Mayuka-chan..." Sasami sniffled, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. "She really did love you, Tenchi-kun. At the very end, she was herself."

"She wasn't just a puppet," Tenchi said, looking at Washu. "Yuzuha said she was empty, but she wasn't. She had a heart. She had memories of us."

Washu stepped forward and took the broken crystal from Tenchi’s hand, examining it closely. "A soul created from shadows and light... it’s a fragile thing, Tenchi. But you're right. Life isn't defined by how you were made, but by the choices you make before the end."

Ryoko looked up, her gaze fixed on the horizon where the dark rift had finally sealed shut. "Yuzuha... she's still out there, isn't she? In that hole."

"The world of darkness is collapsing," Katsuhito said, walking up to join them. "Without the Tree of Darkness to anchor it, Yuzuha has lost her kingdom. Whether she survived the backlash of the Light Hawk Sword... only time will tell."

Tenchi looked down at the paper crane in his hand. He carefully smoothed out the creases, though the bloodstains remained.

"We promised her a Christmas," Tenchi said, a small, sad smile appearing on his face. "Even if she isn't here to see it... we should still have one. For her."

Ayeka nodded solemnly, placing a hand on Tenchi’s arm. "Yes. A celebration of the life she lived, however brief it was."

As the sun finally broke through the clouds, bathing the Masaki house in a warm, golden glow, the group stood together in silence. The battle was over, the shadow had retreated, but the memory of the girl who had bridged two worlds remained—a lingering scent of summer cicadas in the middle of a winter's tale.

Chapter Ten:
"The Power of Jurai Can't Reach"

"The power of Jurai cannot reach us?! Then the Light Hawk Sword is..."

Ayeka shouted at Katsuhito, practically lunging at him.

About an hour had passed since Tenchi and Ryoko disappeared beyond the door. The sky, which had been clear until a moment ago, was now covered in clouds, and rain began to fall in heavy drops from the rapidly darkening heavens.

"Most likely, yes. Even if he can use it, it will have almost no power."

"But why? The Light Hawk Sword is supposed to be the strongest in the universe!"

"That is because the other side is a world of darkness. Yuzuha is a being of shadow. In a world of darkness, the power of light cannot be used."

"Then why did you let Lord Tenchi go?! There must be some way!"

Ayeka's face flushed red as she refused to back down. Washu and Mihoshi's group watched in silence as the brother and sister of the Juraian Royall Family argued.

"The Tree of Darkness... that is likely the source of Yuzuha's power. If only we had a Tree of Light..."

"A Tree of Light?"

"Tsunami. The tree that became the progenitor of the Imperial Family."

It was true. Tenchi was under Tsunami's protection. This had been proven beyond a doubt during his previous battle with Kagato. Even at this very moment, Tsunami was surely watching over him. If that power were unleashed, Yuzuha wouldn't stand a chance. Washu likely knew this as well, which is why she had sent Tenchi off.

"I can't believe it..."

Ayeka seemed to take her brother's silence as a sign of resignation.

"Wait! If it’s a tree of the Imperial Family, there's one right here. My brother's tree—Funaho!"

"What?" Katsuhito looked surprised. "Ayeka, for Tenchi—"

"It’s alright. I am going."

Cutting her brother off, Ayeka spun on her heel and ran.

"Ryoko, Ryoko! Pull yourself together!"

Submerged up to his neck in the murky liquid of a giant beaker, Tenchi shook the unconscious Ryoko.

"Quite a look for you," Yuzuha said, slowly descending through the air. "That beaker... I created Mayuka inside that cultivation tank. Using my hair and yours. Shall I dissolve you two as well? Shall I make you one?" She taunted him with a sing-song voice. "That woman seems to have spent all her energy. She won't last long either way. Well, what will it be, Prince?"

"What will it be? I've had enough of this!" Tenchi screamed, losing himself to rage. "Why are you doing this? If it’s me you want, why involve Sasami and Ryoko? Give Sasami back! Turn Mayuka back to normal!"

"Then you’ll stay here?" A shadow fell over Yuzuha's face. "Promise me that, and I’ll let the other two go."

"Don't... Tenchi..." Ryoko stirred. "Don't listen to her. She'll devour you... she wants your heart."

"Quiet!" Yuzuha snapped. "Still have enough energy to flap your mouth? Mayuka!"

She gestured toward the cave exit. Mayuka appeared, holding the unconscious Sasami in her arms.

"A trade, Prince. Submit to me now, or watch this child be torn apart."

"Damn you..." Tenchi’s lips trembled with fury. "Fine. I’ll do as you say. Just let Ryoko and Sasami out of here."

"Tenchi!?" Ryoko's eyes widened.

"Very well." Yuzuha snapped her fingers. The liquid in the beaker rose, pushing them out and dumping them onto the floor. "Now, kneel. Swear it. Swear the Prince of Jurai belongs to Yuzuha forever." Her voice shook with suppressed excitement.

"Don't do it, Tenchi—" Ryoko struggled to stand.

"I'll swear it. But only—if you can beat me!"

The Light Hawk Sword materialized in Tenchi's hand.

"The Light Hawk Sword?! Impossible!" Shock flashed across Yuzuha's face.

The sword's light was dim, flickering violently in places. It was a blade forged purely from the energy of his rage. But it was the only weapon he had.

"Yaaaaaa!"

Tenchi charged at Yuzuha with a cry, but in that split second, Mayuka stepped in his way.

"No! Not my Mama!!"

"Mayuka!?" The Light Hawk Sword vanished instantly from Tenchi's hand.

"Lady Funaho..."

Ayeka stood before the tree of Funaho, looking up at the branches as if in prayer. "Please—lend me your strength!!"

Thunder rolled, and heavy rain lashed against Ayeka's upturned face. Suddenly, the branches shivered, and countless rays of light descended from thousands of leaves onto the water's surface. A single small twig detached itself from the tree and settled gently into Ayeka's hand.

"Thank you, Lady Funaho!"

Clutching the twig tight, Ayeka ran back the way she came.

"No! Yuzuha is my Mama. Don't bully Mama!"

Mayuka's eyes were fierce with anger as she slashed at Tenchi without mercy. With every swipe of her claws, Tenchi's skin tore and blood sprayed. His clothes were shredded beyond recognition; his upper body was a bloody mess.

"Mayuka, stop! Stop it!"

Having lost his weapon, Tenchi could do nothing but hold up his arms to protect himself.

"No! I won't forgive you!"

Relentlessly, Mayuka sought an opening and struck. "Who are you? Why are you here? Why did you come to bully Mama?"

She has no memory?! Does she not remember me? Was calling me 'Papa' earlier just because she was told to?!

"Die!!" Mayuka's claws lunged straight for Tenchi's heart.

"Ugh!" He twisted his body instinctively, but he wasn't fast enough. Her claws dug deep into his side, and a searing pain shot through his brain.

"She'll die, Mayuka. If she dies, the soul escapes. Use more restraint," Yuzuha's voice sounded distant.

"Uugh..." Tenchi collapsed to his knees, clutching his side. "Mayuka... it's me. It's Tenchi. Please, remember!"

"Tenchi?" Mayuka raised her claws with a blank expression.

It was then.

"Noooooooo!!"

Waking up at the sound of Tenchi's voice, Sasami screamed with all her might. "Why?! Why are you doing this?! Mayuka, look! It's Papa! It's Mayuka's Papa!"

"Papa...?" Mayuka's hand stopped. She looked back at Sasami. "Ah..."

Sasami's small figure was reflected in Mayuka's hollow eyes.

"Mayuka! Don't listen to her!" Yuzuha shouted. "That man is the enemy. He's just like Ryoko. He came here to kill you!"

"Ngh..." Ryoko gritted her teeth, struggling to stand. It was no use—the wound to her back had robbed her of her strength. She could barely manage to stay on her knees.

"Enemy...?" Mayuka's gaze wandered, confused. "Who... not Ryoko..."

"It's Sasami! Have you forgotten?" Tenchi shouted desperately.

His hands were covered in blood. When he instinctively wiped them against his pants, he heard a crinkle in his pocket. It was the small paper crane Mihoshi had given him.

"Mayuka, look at me!"

Grimacing in pain, Tenchi forced himself up and pressed the paper crane into Mayuka's hand. "You made this. Together with Sasami."

Mayuka looked down at her hand. The sky-blue paper crane, bloodstained and half-crushed, caught her eye.

"A crane..."

Color returned to Mayuka’s eyes. The expression of rage vanished instantly. "I made this... the cicadas were buzzing... Sasami was there... I was going to give it to Papa as a present..."

Suddenly, Mayuka’s arms wrapped around Tenchi. "Papa... Papa... Papa!!" Her tears fell against his neck.

"Thank goodness... you remembered." Tenchi gently stroked the back of the sobbing girl.

"I don't believe it... my control was broken!?" Yuzuha trembled, her eyes wide. "You idiot!!"

Losing her composure, she slammed her body into the two of them.

"Kyaa!" The impact sent Mayuka flying.

"You... you thing!" Yuzuha, eyes bloodshot, grabbed Mayuka by the hair and dragged her up. "A mere doll! Empty inside! Nothing but fabricated memories!"

"Stop it, Mama!" Mayuka’s expression as she cried out looked entirely human.

"Don't call me Mama!" Yuzuha screamed. "I told you, didn't I? You're a *Hitogata*! You're a mannequin... a puppet!"

Yuzuha’s eyes flashed with a sharp light.

"Ngh!" The crystal in Mayuka’s chest began to glow.

"Yes... that’s a good girl..." Yuzuha’s eyes burned with an eerie light.

"Ugh... uaaaah..." Mayuka’s hands began to rise slowly.

Then, like a bolt of lightning, Mayuka’s claws slashed across Yuzuha’s right eye.

"Gyaaaaaaa!"

With a horrific scream, Yuzuha leapt back. "You—!?"

Yellow liquid poured from her ruined right eye, staining the floor. Yuzuha backed away, clutching her face in shock.

"I'm sorry, Mama... no, Yuzuha. Mayuka couldn't be your replacement. I couldn't do what you said. Because... I fell in love with Papa." Mayuka tried her best to smile. "So I can't stay by your side anymore. I want to see that sky one more time. The blue summer sky you admired so long ago... it's there. I know. You loved it too, didn't you? You wanted to go there all along..."

Suddenly, Mayuka’s face crumpled, and tears rolled down her cheeks. "Let's go together! Papa’s world is so big. You’ll love it too, Yuzuha!"

"Mayuka..." Yuzuha’s hand moved as if drawn in by Mayuka’s words.

"Let’s have Christmas together. They say it’s winter at the Startica over there."

Mayuka reached out her hand. The moment their fingers—mother and daughter—touched, Yuzuha suddenly turned.

"Traitor! I’ll destroy you!!"

A blade of pale blue light flew from Yuzuha’s hand, piercing Mayuka straight through the chest.

"Aaah!"

The crystal in her chest shattered with a sharp *clink*, and the blade of light disintegrated. For a moment, Mayuka’s body flared up, enveloped in an aura of life.

"Yuzuha...?"

The aura faded. Mayuka staggered, her eyes wide in daze. She collapsed like a broken doll.

"Mayuka!?" Tenchi rushed to catch her. "Mayuka!"

Sasami and Ryoko knelt beside her as well. Mayuka opened her eyes slightly. "Papa... I'm sorry. I did such horrible things..."

"That’s not true!" Tenchi cried.

"I was a bad girl... that’s why Ryoko was angry, too..."

"Stay with us! Mayuka, look at me!"

Mayuka’s eyes began to dim, remaining motionless. "Let's all... have Christmas... Mama and Papa, too. I’m glad... I was born..."

Mayuka gave a faint smile. Then, a final aura of life became a flickering light, enveloping her body.

"Mayuka!?" Sasami’s voice trembled.

Mayuka’s form began to fade. The aura of life wavered as if hesitating, then broke into tiny fragments of light and flew away, as if seeking a world of radiance.

"Mayuka? Mayuka! Mayuka—!!" Sasami screamed with all her heart.

Mayuka was gone. As the only proof she had ever lived in this world, the two pieces of her shattered crystal fell to the floor with a soft *clatter*.

"Waaaaah!"

Sasami clung to Tenchi and began to sob. Tenchi silently picked up the broken crystal and tucked it into the pocket that held the paper crane.

"Tell me... is it fun to play with lives like toys?" Tenchi gently removed Sasami's hands and stood to face Yuzuha. "That girl was alive. She was trying to live. She *should* have lived—!"

Yuzuha's mask-like face twitched. "She was just a *Hitogata*. I can make as many as I want. Identical ones, down to the last detail."

"Is that really true?" Tenchi's gaze seemed to pierce through Yuzuha. "Maybe that was true when she was born. But you gave her memories. You built a heart. It was *your* heart. She was your alter-ego, filled with your thoughts and your wishes."

"Shut up!" Yuzuha recoiled.

"I don't know what your true wish was. But you... you killed your own self!"

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Yuzuha's body shook. "So what?! What could you people of Jurai possibly understand!?"

For a second, a scene of midsummer flashed through Yuzuha's mind. A girl half Mayuka's age was laughing in the light. A young prince was looking straight at her with honest eyes.

It's a promise, Yuzuha!

"Uuuugh..." A groan escaped Yuzuha's lips.

She hadn't wanted to know. If possible, she wanted to remain ignorant. Mayuka, who held the soul of an eight-year-old girl in a sixteen-year-old body. Mayuka, who went to deliver a present she could never give. Mayuka, who was born in darkness, spent six months beneath the earth, and raced from girlhood to adulthood in just two days.

Mayuka was Yuzuha's wish itself. She had fulfilled Yuzuha's wish, and then vanished...

"What could you possibly know!?" Yuzuha's voice sounded like a sob.

Tenchi felt something change. Yuzuha's form was wavering. No, the entire room was shaking, as if vibrating.

"Uaaaaaaaah!!"

Suddenly, Yuzuha let out a terrifying scream. Her back bulged, and black wings appeared. Transforming her ugly form into something even more hideous, Yuzuha spread wings made of bone and membrane and took flight, shaking the darkness.

"Die!!" Long talons swept toward Tenchi.

"Tenchi!" Ryoko instantly grabbed Sasami and snatched Tenchi away, teleporting them.

"You think you can run!?" Yuzuha's form vanished into a black mist. It chased them as a mass of opaque haze.

"If we stay here, we're dead! We have to get back while the door is still open!" Ryoko ignored the pain wracking her body and jumped toward the gap overhead. They squeezed through the tangled roots of the Tree of Darkness. As the black haze followed, the roots reacted, extending tentacles toward Ryoko.

"Ryoko, don't be reckless!" Tenchi shouted.

"No time for that!" Ryoko's voice cut off painfully.

If they could just reach the door—if they got to where the power of Jurai could reach—he could use the Light Hawk Sword. That was the only thought in Ryoko's head.

"Is that it!?" Behind the Tree of Darkness, a long, narrow passage stretching toward the sky came into view.

"I won't let you go!!" the voice shrieked.

The black haze coiled atop the Tree of Darkness, instantly taking the form of a giant Yuzuha. "I'll erase you all from the other world! Rot in the darkness!"

Yuzuha's talons extended and snatched Tenchi.

"Tenchi!!" Ryoko's grip slipped.

"Run, Ryoko!" Tenchi screamed.

At that moment, a dazzling light burst from the passage. Emerging from the light was—Ayeka!

"Lord Tenchi—!" Holding up a glowing branch, Ayeka cried out. "Now, behold! Even in a world of darkness, the light can reach!"

"Ngh!" The moment Yuzuha's grip loosened, Tenchi slipped through her fingers and dropped.

"Lord Tenchi, take this!" The glowing branch flew like an arrow, striking Tenchi and bursting into light.

"This is...!?" The crest on Tenchi’s forehead shone as it caught the light. His wounds closed, and his Juraian raiment enveloped his body.

Tenchi quietly lowered his head. The clouds in his heart, the anger—everything cleared away. When he finally looked up, a glowing sword was in his hand.

Yuzuha watched without moving as Tenchi transformed. "The games are over, Prince." Her giant form vanished, and a small figure appeared atop the Tree of Darkness. It was the form Yuzuha had first shown Tenchi. "This is my true self. Now that we are both in our true forms, let’s settle this."

Tenchi shook his head. "It’s enough. Both you and I have lost something precious. I don't want to trade lives anymore."

"Fight, Prince!!" Yuzuha screamed. Jumping from the tree, she landed before Tenchi. "Are you saying you won't fight me? Am I not even worth your Light Hawk Sword?"

Suddenly, Yuzuha charged. "Fight! If you won't fight, I’ll kill you!" A sword glowing with pale phosphorus appeared in her hand. Tenchi’s Light Hawk Sword moved automatically, parrying Yuzuha’s attack.

"You're good, Prince." Yuzuha attacked relentlessly, one strike after another. Her movements were fast, but her swordsmanship was somehow clumsy. "How many have you killed with that skill? How many will you kill from now on?"

"Stop it!" Tenchi shouted. "I have no intention of killing you. Yuzuha, put your sword away!"

"Is that the Prince of Jurai!?" Yuzuha mocked him. "Do you want to die that badly!?"

Yuzuha’s sword flashed. Using the difference in their sizes, she fought a desperate style that focused entirely on his blind spots. It was a suicidal technique possible only because her speed exceeded Tenchi's, but if it were read, it would be the end. If the fight continued, Tenchi would eventually see the flow.

"Stop, Yuzuha!"

A faint smile appeared on Yuzuha’s lips. "It’s over."

Then, she suddenly changed direction and charged straight at him. It was a speed beyond any prediction. By the time Tenchi thought to parry, the Light Hawk Sword had already moved, piercing Yuzuha’s body.

In that instant... everything went silent. Time in the world of darkness stopped.

We can meet again tomorrow, right?

A boy's voice whispered from the distant past. For a split second, the bright smile of a girl shone in Tenchi's mind, before vanishing like a ghost.

"Lord Tenchi!"

Startled back to his senses by Ayeka’s voice, Yuzuha was already gone. The Tree of Darkness wavered, and the world began to shake again.

"Let’s go, Ayeka."

Following Ryoko, who was still protecting Sasami, Tenchi stepped through the door alongside Ayeka.

Chapter Eleven:
"Tenchi! Ryoko!"

"Tenchi! Ryoko!"

Kiyone came running toward them.

"Oh, Tenchi, your clothes are in tatters!"

"Sasami-chan! Thank goodness!" Mihoshi cried, hugging Sasami tearfully.

"Tenchi-dono, I believed you would return safely," Washu said, smiling as if a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"Thanks, everyone—" Tenchi smiled bashfully.

The rain had stopped, and the midsummer sun blazed in a piercingly clear blue sky.

Ah, the summer air...

Despite everything that had happened, things here hadn't changed at all. If it weren't for this torn T-shirt, it would all feel like a dream. Tenchi's eyes caught sight of Katsuhito, standing a short distance away from the group, smiling silently.

"Grandpa!"

Katsuhito nodded, as if he understood everything. "I'm glad you're back... You did well, Tenchi."

Tenchi shook his head. "I couldn't do anything. I couldn't save anyone." He looked down and pulled the shattered crystal from his pocket. "This is Mayuka-chan. I wanted to at least bring her back here."

"I see." Katsuhito stared at the broken crystal for a moment without taking it. "You should keep it. She looked up to you more than anyone else."

"Yeah..." Tenchi suddenly gripped the crystal tight and looked up. "Grandpa. I... about Yuzuha..."

"It’s alright. You did well—" Katsuhito looked away for a moment, narrowing his eyes against the brilliance of the summer sky. "The darkness of Jurai is a thing of the distant past."

When Katsuhito turned back, his usual calm smile had returned. "Now, let’s go home. Your father is waiting."

Several days passed. One afternoon...

The cicadas were buzzing loudly as usual, making the air vibrate. Tenchi stared blankly out the living room window at the sunflowers in the garden, blooming proudly toward the summer sky.

"The Obon festival is almost over. We have to light the *okuribi* (ceremonial bonfire) today."

"What’s an *okuribi*?" Sasami looked up.

"It’s a ritual to send the spirits who returned home back to the other world."

"Hmm..." Sasami stared idly at her bare toes. "Do we have to send Mayuka-chan back too?"

"Yeah..." Tenchi nodded noncommittally.

As usual, Ayeka was busy with her lace knitting. Ryoko was resting her chin on her hands atop a ceiling beam. Sasami had her legs sprawled out on a shaggy mat, engrossed in a manga, while Mihoshi and Kiyone sat together on the sofa, happily flipping through a fashion magazine.

The only one missing was Mayuka.

It’s only natural that she’s not here... Tenchi thought sadly. *She was a child who never truly existed in the first place.*

He had entrusted the broken crystal to Washu. Even though looking at it made him feel overwhelmed, he found himself reaching for it reflexively.

"Oh? Ryoko-chan, are you crying?" Washu teased, walking briskly out of her lab and looking up at the beam.

"D-Don't be stupid! There's no way I'm crying!" Ryoko sat up abruptly, crossing her legs in a fluster.

"Stupid? What a greeting... and to the greatest scientific genius in the universe, no less." Washu walked to the center of the living room and surveyed everyone's faces. "Listen up, everyone. This is important, so I'm only going to ask once."

"Eh?" Mihoshi and Kiyone looked up in surprise.

"This—" Washu opened her hand.

In her palm, the now-unified crystal of Mayuka was radiating light.

"Washu-san, that's..."

Washu held up a hand to silence Tenchi and spoke slowly. "What do you want to do? I'll do whatever you all decide. If even one person doesn't want this, I won't do it. Everyone... do you want to see Mayuka-chan again?"

Ryoko snapped to attention, staring down at Washu's hand. The glowing crystal seemed to overlap with the image of Mayuka from that day.

> High in the sky... held in the arms of a scolding Ryoko, Mayuka had looked straight up into Ryoko's eyes. While crying and biting her lip, her hands had gripped Ryoko's clothes tightly. Right up until the moment Ryoko let go and cast Mayuka's body into the void...
>
> She could have just abandoned her. She could have let her die and waited for Mayuka's body to hit the ground. But she couldn't. If her resolve had wavered for even half a second longer, Mayuka's body would have been shattered. When Ryoko finally caught her in her arms, Mayuka's face looked as though she were sleeping innocently—

"I want to see her... one more time." Ryoko jumped down from the beam and took the crystal.

"Ryoko!" Tenchi's face lit up.

"Indeed," Ayeka and Sasami smiled at each other.

"You don't even have to ask! It's an okay from us!" Mihoshi and Kiyone made "OK" signs with their fingers.

"I thought you'd say that." Washu took the crystal back from Ryoko. "Actually, I've already asked Katsuhito-dono and Nobuyuki-dono. Now I just have to ask this little one."

Washu looked down at the crystal and smiled broadly. "Trust in the skills of the universe's greatest genius, Mayuka-chan. I'm going to make sure you see Christmas!"

The seasons turned, and by the time the summer sun began to shine once more, the Masaki household was busy from early morning preparing to welcome a new family member.

In the living room sat a large fir tree—heaven knows where they found it.

"Ryoko-san, put this on the very top!" Kiyone held out a large, shiny gold star.

"You guys are so helpless, not being able to fly," Ryoko hummed as she floated into the air and tied the star to the top of the tree. Since she used brute force to wrap it with thin wire, the star sat a bit crooked.

"It's crooked! Do it over!"

"Yeah, yeah." Ryoko plucked the star off—leaves and all—and started re-tying it to a cluster of top branches.

"Si~lent ni~ght, ho~ly ni~ght~" Beneath the tree, Mihoshi was cheerfully singing while tying colorful ribbons onto a pure white cradle. She had been at it for so long that the cradle was now buried in ribbons.

"Mihoshi! It's still morning!"

"But that's how the song goes!"

"Don't just mess with the ribbons, help me with these decorations!" Kiyone, dripping with sweat and draped in long tinsel, looked down at Mihoshi. However, Kiyone had been working so long herself that the tree was already cluttered like a decorated warship.

In the kitchen, Sasami and Ayeka were in the middle of a heated debate over a dessert cookbook.

"Sasami thinks this cute one is better! After all, it's Christmas and a birthday all at once!"

"Oh, but this square cake is far more elegant."

"Honestly, sister! Think about your own skill level. Even Sasami can't make cream roses this detailed!" The path to becoming a master pastry chef seemed long.

In the yard, Nobuyuki was painting with unpracticed hands. The rocking horse being painted a lovely pale pink was his own handiwork. Despite being an architect, Nobuyuki was clumsy, and his fingers were covered in bandages.

"Man, I thought I could do a better job than this..."

"That’s what makes it good. The fact that it’s a little lopsided," Katsuhito said coolly from the veranda, knitting a pair of tiny baby socks. His work was professional-grade, featuring openwork and ruffles.

"Father, you're quite skilled."

"My craftsmanship is simply on a different level than yours." The path to becoming a furniture maker also seemed long for Nobuyuki.

Tenchi had been pacing restlessly around the house for a while. He was wearing an apron but had been kicked out of the kitchen, and when he started vacuuming the living room, Kiyone got angry.

"Tenchi-san, that’s the fifth time! You just sucked up one of the decorations a minute ago! We're fine here, go do another room."

"Okay..." Tenchi reluctantly put the vacuum away, then came back with a bucket and rag to wash the windows like a man possessed.

Because of the chaos, their late lunch was somen noodles again. Sasami pulled out a box of origami and started folding cranes and samurai, Ayeka ran to a distant supermarket for the silver dragées she forgot to buy, and Ryo-Ohki—who had been forgotten in the lunch rush—stared resentfully at the fake carrots hanging on the tree.

While the residents of the Masaki house were running around, Washu was sprawled on a couch in her lab, singing along to Christmas songs on a CD. Inside an incubator, adjusted to a perfectly ideal environment, a newborn baby was sleeping peacefully.

As festive melodies bounced around the lab, Washu tapped at her keyboard with one hand. Vast amounts of data began scrolling across the monitor.

"Biological data. Growth projection data. Formula composition data. Baby food data. Immune supplement data and educational program data. Yep, perfect!"

The genius scientist did not yet know that most of this data would soon become useless junk.

At the front entrance, Azaka and Kamidake, who had become permanent fixtures as gateposts, were wearing red hats, much to the shock of passersby.

Eventually, the long day drew to a close, and the lights came on in the Masaki living room. The Christmas tree lights twinkled in the window glass, which was now cleaner

than anyone could have hoped. To the sound of out-of-season Christmas songs, the cake was solemnly brought from the kitchen to the table.

On top of the cake, a single small candle was lit. Studded with silver dragées like a galaxy flowing through the sky and decorated with pastel stars and flowers, the cake was the fruit of Sasami and Ayeka’s labor.

"Wow, it's amazing!" Cheers and applause erupted from the group.

"Look, see? It's your birthday cake."

Tenchi peered into the cradle. When he poked the newborn’s cheek, the baby opened her bright eyes and looked up at Tenchi with wonder.

"She recognizes her Papa," Mihoshi said, peering in from the other side.

"Let me hold her for a sec. Come on, it's okay, right?" Ryoko suddenly scooped the baby up.

"Ah, Ryoko-san! If you're that rough..."

"You'll break her!" Sasami and Ayeka rushed over in a panic.

"It's fine. I've held this kid before, you know."

The baby’s eyes went wide with surprise, and she suddenly burst into a loud cry.

"There, you see! Give her to me!" Ayeka quickly took the baby back. "There, there. What a rough big sister you have."

The baby wailed in protest.

"No, sister. You have to be gentle..."

"Maybe her diaper is wet?"

"Maybe she's hungry?"

"That's you!"

"Now, now, babies are supposed to cry."

"Man, I’ve forgotten how to hold a baby..."

Sasami, Kiyone, Mihoshi, Washu, and Nobuyuki all huddled their heads together to look down at the infant.

"Ayeka. Here, let me try." Katsuhito took the baby from Ayeka’s arms and began to soothe her gently. As if remembering something, the baby suddenly stopped crying and gripped Katsuhito’s collar with her tiny hand.

"Grandpa, you're amazing!" Tenchi said, eyes wide with admiration.

"Ho ho, it's simply the wisdom of age." Katsuhito smiled down at the child.

"Well then, now that the crisis is averted—ready?" Washu raised a glass. "Merry Christmas! Mayuka-chan, happy birthday!"

"Merry Christmas!"
"Happy Birthday!"

Everyone spoke in unison. The baby, who had begun to drift off, opened her eyes again at the sound.

The out-of-season Christmas songs echoed loudly. For this newly born life, what kind of days and seasons would lie ahead? The midsummer Eve was quickly filled with boisterous laughter, and surrounded by her many "moms" and "dads," Mayuka happily drifted back into her dreams.

[END]

Afterword

Thank you to everyone who always supports *Tenchi*. This tenth volume, *Midsummer's Eve*, has become a truly memorable book for me. By the time this book is released, the premiere should be close at hand... That's right, it's the second *Tenchi Muyo!* movie.

I received the offer to write the movie's screenplay last winter. I began writing with the idea, "What if a daughter suddenly appeared before Tenchi?" and after several rewrites, I finally finished it on Christmas Day. I remember feeling so happy seeing the Christmas decorations and illuminations filling the streets. *Midsummer's Eve*—looking at the title alone, you might think of Christmas in the Southern Hemisphere. Or perhaps you envision a sun-tanned, barefoot girl. The answer is... **Yes to both!**

A Christmas tree decorated on a midsummer night. The summer when a boy first meets a girl. The "Eve" where you give a gift to someone precious. The night a holy babe was born. The "Eve" in the title carries all these various meanings. (To be honest, I was quite pleased when I thought of this title. To be even *more* honest, even though it's a summer movie, I just really wanted to do a Christmas theme no matter what.)

Now, while this book is the novelization of *Midsummer's Eve*, it is simultaneously the original work. (I can say that, right? Since the same author wrote both!) I am delighted that I was able to write to my heart's content about things I couldn't fully include in the screenplay due to time constraints and various other reasons—such as the scenes of Jurai's *Startica* (Star Festival), the meeting between Achika and Yuzuha, and the inner thoughts of Yuzuha and Mayuka.

I am deeply indebted to Director Kimura of the movie version of *Eve*. Through many discussions in meetings and exchanges over the phone to deepen the creative vision, I received so much from him. Within the dynamic of the Masaki household being shaken by the intruder Mayuka, what did Tenchi, Ryoko, and Ayeka think, and how did they change? For the "Tenchi Family," which originally started as a gathered group of freeloaders, what does "family" truly mean? I believe this story—and the movie *Midsummer's Eve*—is a depiction of the process where each individual re-examines their own "present."

I've become a bit too serious... so let's have a little "behind-the-scenes" talk. For a long time, I wandered through CD shops searching for BGM to work to, and I finally found something where I went, "This is it!"—*Cante Flamenco*. I've been listening to it constantly lately, but... **it does not suit a summer in Okayama at all.** On the other

hand, if I play nothing, the sound of trucks roaring past outside is never-ending, which is also quite depressing.

So, for the first half of writing, I kept swapping through various CDs, but in the second half, I pulled out some old Progressive Rock and suddenly got hooked. Therefore, this time I am indebted to **PENDRAGON** and **GRYPHON**. For the last hundred pages or so, I had them on an endless loop morning, noon, and night (my daughter was just glad this happened at the office). I mean, you have soy sauce for sashimi, brown hair for "Amurers" (Namie Amuro fans), and for Fantasy, it has to be Prog Rock, right? (Wait, is that wrong?)

But in my heart, this story is a **Fantasy**. With a world of darkness and a world of light, a Prince, Princesses, and a legendary sword—there's no way it *isn't* a fantasy! The world of *Tenchi* is so broad that I can claim that and it still fits. So, even if the Prince usually spends his time tilling a carrot patch or slurping somen noodles, it's absolutely "no problem." Is that the secret to how a former space pirate and a classical, traditional princess can coexist in your heart without your head splitting apart, Tenchi-kun?

And so, I am now eagerly looking forward to the movie's release. I am excited to see how Ryoko and Ayeka will move on the big screen this time—and along with the visual expectations, I'm looking forward to the music. What kind of melodies will we hear from the worlds of the *Startica* and Yuzuha? I hope you enjoy both the movie version and the novelized story of *Eve*. With heartfelt gratitude to the readers who love the world of *Tenchi*, to Director Kimura, and to the staff of the movie version.

Listening to BLACKMORE'S NIGHT, **Naoko Hasegawa**